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MIKE SHAYNE

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DEADLY QUEEN

by Brett Halliday

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*It seemed like a simple assignment for the big
redheaded Miami detective — guard the sixteen-
year-old girl chess player from harm. The
tournament prize was a golden queen worth a
half million dollars. People have killed for
less 4*

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It seemed like a simple enough assignment for Mike Shayne — guard the sixteen-year-old girl chess player from harm. Yet the girl and Shayne and everyone connected with the big tournament were merely pawns in the larger game of life and death, and the killer had a special gambit designed to annihilate them!

Deadly Queen

by BRETT HALLIDAY

IT WAS A CONTEST OF WITS, OF NERVE, OF WILL and determination. There was a hush over the amphitheater as the opponents faced each other, faces tight and drawn in concentration.

The girl reached out a slender hand, and the audience leaned forward in anticipation. She touched a white pawn lightly, hesitated just a fraction of a second, then moved it decisively.

Behind them on the stage, an assistant moved an oversized pawn on the giant chessboard that was laid out on the floor for the TV camera shooting down on it from above. A huge monitor at the side of the stage showed the scene in the audience in the amphitheater. A low rustle ran through the crowd as the girl's move was debated.

The Cuban seated across from the girl looked long and hard at the board as the time allotted him for his move began to tick away. He needed little of it. Moving suddenly, he grasped a black bishop and slid it away from him. The stage assistants leaped to duplicate the move on the large board behind them.

Michael Shayne shook his head and said to Timothy Rourke in a low voice, "This'll never take the place of the NFL."

They were sitting in the audience, close to the stage, in an area reserved for the press and for special guests of the tournament. Rourke was there in his capacity as the top reporter on the *Miami Daily News*. Shayne was working, too, though this was the first time in his long career as a private detective that he had attended a chess game in the line of duty.

"Maybe not," Rourke agreed with Shayne's comment, "but as long as there's as much at stake as there is here, people are going to be pretty damn interested."

"They usually are when half a million dollars is on the line," Shayne said. His gray eyes, active under craggy red brows, cut over to the display at the side of the stage. Standing there in a glass case that was flanked by two security guards armed with riot guns was a chess piece, but it was a chess piece like none Shayne had ever seen before. Two and a half feet tall, made in the shape of a beautiful woman and representing a robed and tiaraed queen, it was shining in the lights of the amphitheater with the dull gleam of pure gold.

"I'll bet as many people are looking at the prize as are watching the game," Rourke said. "Whether they understand chess or not, they know what half a million means. That's why there are TV cameras all over the place."

"Nothing gets ratings like money, I guess," Shayne ran a thumbnail along the line of his jaw. "That was a good idea Vardon had, to offer a prize like that in a winner-take-all match between the world's best two players."

Rourke scribbled a note on the pad in his lap as the girl on the stage made another move. "The fact that one of those players is a pretty little sixteen-year-old girl doesn't hurt publicity, either. Match her up against a guy from a Communist country, and you've got a natural. High stakes and us against them."

From their position, Shayne could see a little bit of the area in the wings. He saw a woman standing there, watching the proceedings on the stage anxiously, her hands knotted together in front of her face as if she was praying. Maybe that was just what Sandra Collins was doing, Shayne mused. That was her daughter Megan out there on the stage, playing her heart out against the Cuban, Moreno. Playing for half a million dollars in gold and the honor of the United States

IT WAS A SIMPLE ENOUGH JOB, ON THE SURFACE OF IT. Sandra Collins had come to see him at his Flagler Street office and explained about the upcoming chess match and the possible danger to her daughter. Shayne had already heard about the match through the publicity that had appeared in the news media. It wasn't hard to get publicity when a man like Hubert Vardon, with his millions of dollars, put up a prize like the Golden Queen, just so that he could see the world's leading chess masters go at each other head to head. This match wasn't for the official championship of the world; Moreno had already claimed that six months earlier from the Russian who had held

it previously. But Megan Collins, all five feet of her, was now the leading contender for that honor. If she won this special match, it would only be a matter of time before she took the championship officially, according to the experts.

And if she won this match, she would be a very rich little girl.

It wasn't often that Shayne took bodyguard jobs, but after Megan's mother had explained about the two previous attempts by strangers—to kidnap her, Shayne had agreed to take the case. During the game themselves, which would stretch over several days, the police and the private security force hired by Vardon would be responsible for Megan's safety. Outside of the amphitheater, however, it was up to Shayne to protect her.

Shayne looked past the people seated in front of him to the front row of the audience, where Hubert Vardon himself occupied the center seat, on a level with the stage and only a few feet from the players. From here, Vardon could see every frown of concentration, every squinted eye, every tiny drop of perspiration on the faces of the two people he had brought here to Miami.

As Moreno made a knight move and Megan followed quickly with a maneuver by one of her rooks, Shayne leaned over to Rourke and said, "Vardon must really be a fan of this game. He's going to be out over a million dollars for this match, isn't he?"

Rourke shook his head. "No, the TV deal he set up will more than cover his expenses. He strikes me as a pretty shrewd character. He wouldn't have made such a big pile of bucks in the computer business if he wasn't."

Megan was looking down at the board intently, shaking her blond head slowly from side to side. The audience was quiet, the whole place hushed. Shayne grimaced. He still couldn't see the appeal of this thing as a spectator sport, but people were entitled to like it if they wanted to, he supposed. Megan let her hand hover over one of her pieces for a moment, then moved it across the board tentatively.

Shayne saw the sudden grin on Moreno's face and knew that the girl had made a crucial mistake. The Cuban slid his queen several spaces and looked across at Megan triumphantly. Megan shrugged, tipped her king over.

The audience babbled excitedly.

"What the hell happened?" Shayne asked.

Before Rourke could answer, Hubert Vardon was on his feet, leading a round of polite applause. Moreno stood, slim and elegant in a dark suit, and bowed slightly in acknowledgement. Raising his voice slightly, Rourke said over the clapping, "Megan conceded. Look at the

monitor; her king is in check now. Knowing the level these people play at, she probably recognized that Moreno had her beaten in a dozen or so more moves."

Shayne just shook his head and got up, ready to make his way backstage and meet Sandra and Megan Collins. Rourke stood up beside him and went on, "That gives Moreno a three game to two lead."

WITH THE LANKY REPORTER AT HIS SIDE, SHAYNE PRESSED through the crowd. An announcer had come on stage and was giving the score of the match so far, then reminded the audience that the next game would begin promptly at two P.M. the next day. Shayne knew that already. He went past a couple of uniformed guards by showing them his special pass and mounted a short stairway at the side of the stage. He saw Megan and her mother in the wings on the opposite side and started across to them, Rourke tagging along. Other reporters were converging on the scene, too, but most of them were stopping to talk to Moreno, who was holding court at the edge of the stage.

Shayne strode up to Megan and said sincerely, "Sorry, kid. You played a good game. Go get him tomorrow."

Megan shook her head, her features tight, her emotions masked. "I played a lousy game," she said. "He suckered me completely with a Newcomb maneuver. A beginner could have beaten me today."

Sandra Collins slipped an arm around her daughter's shoulders. "Don't be so hard on yourself, darling. You're still in good shape to win the match."

"And the Golden Queen," Rourke put in. "What'll you do with it if you win, Megan?"

"Please, I don't want any questions right now, Mr. Rourke," Sandra answered for her daughter. "I'm sure you understand."

Rourke shrugged, and Shayne said, "Do you want to head back to the hotel?"

"I think that would be best. It's getting late."

Shayne glanced at his watch. It wasn't even ten yet, but he imagined that Sandra had several hours of studying in mind for Megan once they got back to the hotel where Hubert Vardon had provided a suite for them. Shayne had been staying in one room of the suite for several nights now, in case of trouble, and he knew that Sandra worked the kid pretty hard, going over and over past games that Moreno had played, looking for any weakness he might have. Seemed like a lot of pressure for somebody not even out of high school, but that wasn't part of Shayne's job. All he was supposed to be concerned about was keeping Megan safe.

Rourke wandered over to throw questions at Moreno like the rest of his fellow reporters, and Shayne said, "Come on, you two. No point in hanging around here." As they turned away from the stage and started down a hall that would lead them to a rear exit, Shayne heard someone calling from behind them.

He turned and saw Hubert Vardon hurrying after them. Vardon was a compact man in his middle sixties, with closely-trimmed gray hair and a neat moustache. He was wearing a tuxedo, as he had done at all the games so far in the match. When he caught up with them, he put a hand on Megan's shoulder and said avuncularly, "I'm so sorry, Megan. I thought when the game started that you were going to play rings around him today."

Megan shrugged. "Guess I just choked, huh?"

Vardon shook his head vehemently. "Don't say that, my dear. Remember, no matter how the match turns out, you're one of the two best players in the world, or you wouldn't even be here. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"Thank you, Mr. Vardon," Sandra Collins said. "It's a great honor that you invited Megan here. Now, we need to get on to the hotel, so that she can get her sleep."

"Yes, indeed. You should be rested for tomorrow's game, Megan." Vardon smiled around at them and went on, "Well, good night. Take care of our young lady, Mr. Shayne."

"I will," Shayne grunted. "You can count on that."

THEY MADE THEIR WAY THROUGH THE REAR of the building, emerging through a door that led out into a reserved parking area. Shayne's Buick was here, along with the cars of Vardon, Moreno, and the other officials connected with this special match. There were uniformed security officers stationed around the perimeter of it, so that no one could get to the cars. So far, there had been no trouble back here with fans. Despite the TV coverage and the well-attended games, this still wasn't like a rock concert or a sporting event; there weren't any screaming fans trying for a closer look at their idols. Shayne was grateful for that, since it made his job a lot easier. So far, in fact, it had been a milk run.

If he hadn't been told by Sandra and Megan about the carload of men that tried to run them off the road near their home in Connecticut and the attempt by men in ski masks to grab Megan when they arrived at the airport in Miami, Shayne wouldn't have believed that the young girl was in any danger at all. But Miami Chief of Police Will Gentry had confirmed the airport incident for him and had checked with the

Connecticut State Police on the other business. The Collinses were telling Shayne the truth, and he had agreed to help them out. Hubert Vardon was footing the bill, but so far, Shayne hadn't had to do anything to earn his money except spend time with Sandra and Megan, which was certainly a pleasant enough assignment. Both of the ladies were attractive.

Tonight, though, Shayne sensed that something was different as soon as they stepped out of the building. There was a rumble of sound coming from the sidewalk of the street that bordered the lot, and as he glanced over, he saw the crowd of people gathered there. The noise coming from them had an ugly tinge to it. There were signs being brandished here and there among the knot of people, and Shayne could make out the angry Spanish phrases on them. He saw Fidel Castro's name more than once and knew that these demonstrators had to be expatriate Cubans opposed to the bearded one's regime.

And Raul Moreno was part of that regime, with a minor job in Castro's government. He was reputed to be a friend of Fidel himself, even though Castro's taste in games ran more to baseball and terrorism than chess.

Shayne put a hand on Sandra's arm as she looked over at the mob and tensed. He said, "Don't worry. They're just waiting to yell at Moreno. They won't bother us. Besides, the cops are on the job."

There were several uniformed men lined up along the sidewalk, both Miami police officers and the private security guards. They were keeping the demonstrators in line well, as far as Shayne could see. Megan wasn't paying any attention to any of it as the three of them walked across the concrete toward Shayne's car.

Shayne looked up at a sudden surge in the noise level coming from the crowd. The demonstrators were shouting louder now, and a glance over his shoulder told Shayne why. Moreno, accompanied by two members of his entourage, had just emerged from the building behind them.

Sandra still had an arm around Megan's shoulders, and she tightened her grip as the noise from the crowd grew. Shayne said in a low voice, "Don't let it bother you. The cops have things under control."

He glanced back, saw that Moreno was ignoring the protestors. The slender Cuban was striding straight ahead, face expressionless.

Shayne's head swiveled. Keeping his gaze constantly moving was part of the job, and that was what let him see what everyone else missed.

There was a small flash of light in an upper window of an otherwise darkened building across the street . . .

SHAYNE WAS MOVING EVEN BEFORE HE HEARD the flat whapping sound in the air close to his head. A long arm reached out and wrapped itself around Megan and Sandra, pulling them forward and down. Sandra cried out in surprise and pain as her nylon-clad knees scraped on the concrete of the parking lot. Then Shayne was over them, keeping them down with his left hand while his right gripped the pistol he had jerked from the holster under his arm.

Shielding them with his body, Shayne whipped his head around in time to see one of Moreno's companions staggering and clutching at his body. A scream came from somewhere. Moreno dived for cover behind a parked car.

Shayne looked back at the window where he had seen the first flash of silenced gunfire. Another one came. The crowd and the police were beginning to realize that something was wrong, and more cries split the air.

Shayne tipped his gun barrel up and squeezed off two shots, sending them into the window where the sniper had set up his ambush. Megan and Sandra both cried out as Shayne's gun blasted. Shayne put another shot into the window and then surged to his feet, pulling Megan up with him and shoving her away from him, behind another car. He barked at Sandra, "You, too! Get behind some cover!"

She did as he said. Shayne ran away from them, trying to draw the sniper's fire, but no more shots came from the window. One of the cops called to him, "What's going on?"

Shayne gestured up at the window. "Somebody shooting from up there!" he shouted back. The crowd of demonstrators was vanishing in a hurry.

Some of the cops were charging across the street now, guns drawn, trying to flush out the ambusher. Shayne doubted that they would have much luck. It had been quiet over there for several moments, and the gunman had had time to reach the street and make it out one of the exits that the police hadn't covered yet.

The big redhead came up out of his crouch slowly. It looked like this attempt was over, but he waved a cautioning hand to Sandra and Megan anyway. "Stay where you are," he told them. "Wait till the cops give the all-clear."

Then he hurried over to the knot of people gathered around the man who had been with Moreno earlier, the one who had grabbed at himself and then staggered away.

Shayne expected the worst, and he was right. Pushing through the crowd, he saw the way the man was sprawled limply, saw the dark, spreading puddle beneath him. Moreno knelt beside him, and the

chess master's face was twisted with grief as he shook his head slowly.

Sighing, Shayne holstered his gun. Moreno and his companions weren't part of his job, but he still took it personally that the Cuban had been killed. Because there was one very important question about this sniping that was yet to be answered

Who had been the real target?

II

IT WAS AFTER MIDNIGHT BEFORE SHAYNE, Sandra, and Megan got back to the hotel. There had been questions to answer for the police and the reporters. Will Gentry himself had shown up, and Shayne had told him everything he knew about the shooting, which wasn't much. The police search of the building used by the sniper turned up exactly nothing. It was an office building, deserted at night, and there was no watchman on duty. The gunman had entered by a service door that had been forced, but that was the only sign of his presence.

The dead man had been a friend of Moreno's named Salazar. There had been a gun in a shoulder holster under his coat, Shayne found out from Gentry, which made the big detective suspect that Salazar had been more than a friend to Moreno. This visit to the United States by the Cuban party had been set up through delicate negotiations handled by the State Department. Considering the state of relations between the U.S. and Cuba, it made perfect sense that Moreno would have bodyguards with him. The Cubans wouldn't be inclined to trust all their security to their hosts.

Gentry had looked at the window from which the sniper had fired, calculated the angles roughly in his head, and asked Shayne, "Who was he after, Mike? It could have been either your bunch or the Cubans."

Shayne had shook his head, lighting a cigarette. He said, "I really don't know, Will. I'm supposed to be protecting Megan from would-be kidnappers, not killers. It doesn't make sense to me that someone would take a shot at us."

"But there's plenty of anti-Cuban sentiment here in Miami," Gentry pointed out. "Could have been somebody who doesn't like Cubans in general, or one of the refugees who wanted a try for Moreno since he's in Castro's favor. If I had to guess, I'd say that you and the ladies were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Shayne's fingers were worrying unconsciously at his earlobe. "Maybe you're right, Will," he said thoughtfully. "We'll find out if

they make another try."

If another try came, Shayne hoped it wouldn't be tonight. Sandra and Megan Collins were pretty well shaken up by the incident. They had been in a nervous state to start with, due to the two attempts to snatch Megan and the pressure of the match and everything that was riding on it. The shooting had only made it worse.

SHAYNE USHERED THEM INTO THE HOTEL SUITE, closing the door behind them and making sure it was locked. He reached up and loosened his tie as Sandra said to Megan, "I think we'll skip the strategy session tonight, dear. It's late. Why don't you go on to bed?"

"Sure," Megan said. "Sounds good to me."

She went into the bedroom she and her mother shared. Sandra turned toward Shayne as Megan shut the door behind her and said, "I don't know about you, Mr. Shayne, but after tonight, I could use a drink."

"Absolutely," Shayne said, a grin stretching his lean face. He walked across the room to a bar in the corner. "Martell?"

"That's fine." Sandra sank down gratefully on a sofa, stretching her legs out in front of her. She was silent for a moment, then said slowly, "Thank you for what you did tonight. We'd probably be dead if you hadn't reacted so quickly."

Shayne shrugged as he poured cognac in two glasses. "Maybe, maybe not. We don't know yet who the sniper was after. But it doesn't make any sense to me that someone would want to kill Megan." He took the drinks back across the room and handed one of them to Sandra.

"That's true," she agreed. "But thank you anyway." She sipped the cognac and smiled up at Shayne.

She was a damn fine-looking woman, he thought. In her middle thirties, she was slim, with an expressive face, dark hair that fell in smooth waves to her shoulders, and fine legs. And Shayne knew that she was divorced, raising Megan on her own. The girl must have gotten her blond good looks from her father, Shayne supposed, since Sandra was a dark beauty.

Shayne took a long swallow of the Martell and pushed the thoughts that had popped up in his head to the back of his mind. The last thing he needed in the middle of a case was to get involved with one of his clients in anything but a business sense. He stretched, tossed off the rest of the drink, and said, "Well, I think I'll turn in, too. Good night."

Sandra sat up, putting her drink down on a coffee table. "You're going to bed? I thought we might talk a little."

"About what?" Shayne asked bluntly.

Sandra hesitated, stumbling around over several false starts. Shayne didn't let her see the grin he felt and said firmly, "Good night, Mrs. Collins." He went to the door of his room and on through it, his keen ears picking up the curse that Sandra uttered under her breath.

He was just reaching for the light switch when Megan's scream cut through the suite.

SHAYNE STARTED TO SPIN. Something hit him across the back of the neck, staggering him and driving him forward. He slammed into the wall. Hands grabbed him.

Driving a fist out, Shayne tore out of the grasp of whoever had been waiting for him in his room. His hand went under his coat, fingers curling around the butt of his gun, but before he could get it out, he was hit in the stomach. He could hear Sandra screaming now as well as her daughter. Nausea roiled in his belly from the blow there.

Shayne whirled, dodging a fist by instinct as much as anything else, and lashed out with the gun in his hand. It connected with something. There was a gasp of pain. Shayne cut at the sound with the gun again.

Then someone else hit from behind, crashing into his back and knocking him off-balance. An arm looped around his neck and tightened, cutting off his air. Shayne gasped, threw an elbow back at this newcomer. He was hit again, this time behind the ear. His legs went rubbery.

Whoever had hold of him loosened the grip, and Shayne slumped forward. He tried to stay on his feet, but his strength deserted him. The carpeted floor came up and slapped him in the face.

It seemed like forever, an eternity filled with screaming, scuffling, and then sudden silence, before Shayne could get his hands and knees under him and heave himself up. He got to his feet slowly, still clutching the gun he hadn't gotten to use, and walked gingerly back out into the living room of the suite.

Sandra Collins was sprawled out on the sofa where she had been sitting moments before. There was an ugly bruise starting to show up on her cheek, and blood trickled slowly from a cut on her forehead. She was breathing, though, Shayne saw that right away. He felt some of his strength coming back to him, and when he saw the open door to Megan's room, he crossed to it in three long strides.

The room was empty, he saw as he stood in the doorway, deep trenches appearing in the cheeks of his haggard face. The furniture was upset, the things that had been sitting on top of the dresser now strewn on the floor. Megan had put up a fight.

But that didn't change the fact that she was gone.

The ringing of the telephone made Shayne take a quick indrawn breath of surprise.

He turned around and scooped the instrument up, barked into the receiver, "Shayne."

Hubert Vardon's voice came back at him. "Oh, Mr. Shayne, please tell me that everything is all right there." The tension in his voice was evident, even to someone with as bad a headache as Shayne was developing.

"I wish I could tell you that, Mr. Vardon," Shayne said slowly. "But I'm afraid I can't. We've had some trouble."

"Then it's true." Vardon's tone was bleak. "Megan really has been kidnapped."

Shayne's fingers tightened on the phone. "How did you know that? It just happened a few minutes ago."

Vardon sighed and said, "I got a telephone call just now, Mr. Shayne. A voice on the other end, obviously disguised, told me that Megan had been kidnapped and that it was up to me to save her life."

"What did they want in exchange?" Shayne asked. He had a feeling that he already knew the answer.

"The most obvious thing," Vardon replied, his voice breaking just slightly. "They want the Golden Queen."

III

A LOW MOAN COMING FROM BEHIND HIM made Shayne look around. Sandra was struggling to sit up, holding her head in her hands. Shayne knew that Vardon was also staying in a suite in this hotel, in the penthouse, in fact. He said, "Stay where you are. I'll be up to see you in a few minutes." Then he cradled the phone and strode quickly over to Sandra.

She looked up at him wild-eyed and said, "Megan? Is Megan all right?"

Shayne put his hands on her shoulders and held them firmly. "She's gone," he said bluntly, feeling the shudder that went through Sandra at his words. "But we'll get her back. I promise you we'll get her back."

Tears began to run down Sandra's cheeks. She shook her head in disbelief, said, "Gone? She can't be gone. She just can't be! We've got to call the police —"

Shayne put a hand under her chin and tipped her head up, making her look at him. In a low, intense voice, he told her, "Get hold of

yourself. We can't ring the cops in on this just yet. Vardon just called down here; the kidnappers called him and told him we could have Megan back in exchange for the Golden Queen. I have to go up to Vardon's suite and find out what else they said."

"The Golden Queen?" Sandra still sounded shocked and baffled. "But why . . . It's not ours yet"

"That has to be why they've been after Megan," Shayne declared. "They know you're not rich. Vardon and that stupid statue were the real targets. If the kidnappers make their demands known to the public, there's no way Vardon can turn them down. He can't let a sixteen-year-old girl die just to save the Golden Queen."

"But what can we do? We've got to do something!"

Shayne let go of Sandra and straightened. "I'm going up to see Vardon. You stay here. Don't let anybody in but me. We'll get her back, Sandra. Don't doubt that for a second."

She nodded shakily. "All right, Mr. Shayne . . . Mike. I know you'll do what you can."

"Believe it." Shayne rubbed at his forehead for a second, then forced the pain of his headache out of his consciousness. He went to the door of the suite, paused, and said, "I'll be back."

The look on Sandra's face haunted him all the way up to the penthouse in the elevator.

VARDON HIMSELF ANSWERED SHAYNE'S BRUSQUE KNOCK. The computer magnate and chess buff looked older than he had earlier, looked like a sick, weary old man. He said, "Come in, Mr. Shayne. I suppose we have much to talk over."

Shayne shut the door behind him. "Tell me the rest of it," he said. "What else did the kidnappers tell you to do?"

Vardon had a drink in his hand, and he tossed it down before he answered. "I'm supposed to go to the amphitheater alone and send all the guards away. The Golden Queen is being kept there under strict guard. When everyone else is gone, someone will meet me there and get the Queen. Then, when they've gotten away safely, Megan will be released and a call to the amphitheater will tell me where to find her. They're being very careful to protect themselves."

"Is that thing really worth half a million?" Shayne asked.

Vardon nodded. "Easily. Of course, they can't dispose of it in its present form, but it can be melted down with no trouble. They've chosen their ransom well.

Shayne took a deep breath. "It looks to me like it's up to you, Vardon; it's your statue. What are you going to do?"

Vardon shot a glance at him and said quickly, "What can I do? I have to go along with what they say. I can ill afford to lose something worth that much, no one can, but I couldn't live with that little girl on my conscience, either."

"All right," Shayne nodded. "They want the Queen tonight?"

"They've given me an hour, at the maximum. They're supposed to be watching the theater, so they'll know when I'm alone. Do . . . do you think I'm doing the right thing, Mr. Shayne?"

"Looks like the only thing to do, under the circumstances." Shayne lit a cigarette and let the smoke trickle toward the ceiling. His eyes were narrowed, and he was rubbing at his jaw. He went on slowly, "Of course, there's no reason we have to just let them win, either."

Vardon looked at him sharply. "You have an idea?"

"Maybe. You just go through with your part, though. That way, if I don't do any good, at least Megan will have a chance." A savage grin split his face. "If I do get the statue back, I'll expect something for my trouble. Say, ten percent of its value."

Vardon nodded. "Fair enough, Mr. Shayne. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to get ready to go down there and follow their instructions."

Shayne nodded to him and left the penthouse suite. His brain was racing. He would have to let the kidnappers pick up the statue as they had demanded, and if they were well organized enough to pull this off, he couldn't chance trying to hide out in the auditorium during the payoff. But if he could spot whoever got the statue and follow them . . .

He grimaced in the elevator as he rode down toward the floor where the Collins' suite was located. It was awfully chancy. He had pulled off similar stunts in the past, but he had had considerable amounts of luck on his side, too. This time, it might be different.

And this time, Megan Collins' life was on the line.

Shayne frowned suddenly as the elevator slowed to a stop. A glance at the indicator over the door told him that it was still several floors above the one he wanted. Someone else was moving around the hotel at this late hour. The doors slid open.

A man fell into the elevator, clutching at his crimson-splashed shirt and letting out a moan as he sprawled at Shayne's feet.

SHAYNE JERKED BACK INSTINCTIVELY, yanking his gun out. No one else was in the deserted hallway, though, at least not as far as he could see. And the wounded man lying half in and half out of the elevator would never be a threat to anyone again.

Shayne jabbed the emergency button with a blunt finger, insuring that the elevator would stay where it was, then crouched beside the man. He was swarthy, with a thin moustache, and Shayne realized with a shock that he recognized the man.

Lips that were starting to show bloody froth moved soundlessly. Shayne leaned closer and said urgently, "What is it? What are you trying to say?"

"M-Moreno . . ." the man croaked. More blood bubbled up with the words.

And then the rattle in his throat told Shayne that it was over.

This man had been the second of Moreno's two companions, Shayne knew. And now he was dead, too, the victim of what appeared to be several stab wounds. Shayne straightened from his crouch and hurried out into the hall.

Moreno's suite must be on this floor, he was thinking. It looked like another try had been made, maybe successfully this time. The man had died speaking Moreno's name. Shayne's mouth was a grim line. The Cuban chess master might already be dead.

An open door caught his eye. Shayne raced over to it, hitting it with his shoulder and slamming it back. He brought his gun up, tracking it from side to side rapidly, but nothing menacing moved in front of it. Nothing moved at all.

Raul Moreno was lying on the floor, blood on his face.

His chest was rising and falling, though, Shayne saw. A closer look would have to wait a few seconds. Shayne hurried across the room, kicking open the door to the rest of the suite. He went through the other rooms rapidly, finding no one. When he was sure that they were alone in the suite, he went back to Moreno and knelt beside him.

The man's eyes were flickering open now. Shayne saw that he had a cut on his cheek. It had bled copiously but didn't look too serious. Moreno started to sit up, wide-eyed, but Shayne put a hand on his shoulder and kept him down.

"Take it easy," Shayne grunted. "Are you all right, other than that cut?"

"Alfredo!" Moreno exclaimed. "Where is Alfredo?"

"He's dead," Shayne said. "What happened here?" He stepped back, letting Moreno sit up. The Cuban moaned and put a hand to his head.

"Someone was at the door," Moreno said slowly. "Alfredo went to answer it. When he did, there was a man there with a knife. Before Alfredo could do anything, the man had stabbed him and was coming after me. I tried to dodge him. He cut me —" Moreno touched the still-

oozing cut and winced. "Then Alfredo leaped on him. I tripped and fell and hit my head on something. That is all I remember until I see you just now. You are *Senor* Shayne, I think?"

"That's right. Your friend must have scared off the man with the knife, but not before he got hit a couple of more times. I'm sorry, Moreno."

Moreno shook his head. "Alfredo and Hector both killed in one night! Why did I ever come to this country? Why?"

Shayne heard noises in the hall. The hotel staff would be coming to investigate the stopped elevator on this floor, in answer to the emergency button that Shayne had pressed. There was a gasp and a short outcry, and Shayne knew that the body of the knifed man had been discovered. "You stay right there," he told Moreno. "I'm sure the cops will be here before long, and they'll get medical help for you."

"You cannot stay?"

"I've got other things to do," Shayne said. That was all he was going to tell Moreno; the Cuban didn't need to know that his competition in the match had been snatched tonight, too.

It had been one hell of an evening, Shayne thought as he strode quickly out of Moreno's suite.

He just wondered what was going to happen next.

IV

SHAYNE DODGED THE CROWD IN THE HALL, even though the hotel employees tried to detain him and ask him what had happened. Shayne just glanced at the limp body with the front of its white shirt now stained bright red and then bulled past them, taking the stairs down the few flights to the floor he wanted.

Sandra Collins clutched him as he came into the suite. She buried her face against his chest, and Shayne put his arms around her for a moment. This had to be pure hell for her. He said into her soft hair, "I've got to go now, Sandra. Vardon is going to turn the Queen over to the kidnappers, and I want to be close by when he does."

"Do . . . do you think we can get her back?" Sandra asked brokenly.

"I'm sure we can." Shayne patted her on the back, then released her and stepped over to the telephone. "You don't need to be alone while this is happening, though. I know someone who can come over and stay with you."

A quick call to Lucy Hamilton took care of that. Lucy, Shayne's lovely brown-haired secretary, said that she would be right over once Shayne had given her a quick, sketchy rundown of the situation. One of Lucy's

best qualities, Shayne knew, was her sympathetic ear, and he could think of no one better to stay with Sandra right now.

After he hung up the phone, he sat Sandra down on the sofa and said, "Try not to worry. I know that's a stupid thing to say, but give it a try anyway. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He left her there, knowing that Lucy would be arriving within minutes, and went down to the parking lot, leaving the hotel through a service door so that he could avoid any cops that might be arriving to investigate the murder of Moreno's friend. With the speed that things were breaking now, he didn't want to be delayed even a minute. This case might have started out as a milk run, he thought, but it had sure changed in a hurry.

Shayne was striding long-legged toward his Buick when he saw the doors of another car on the lot suddenly open. Two men got out, facing him, and Shayne threw on the brakes. His hand started toward the butt of his pistol.

"Hold it, Shayne!" one of them rapped. He saw their hands come up, already holding weapons. He froze. There was nothing else he could do. They had him cold.

THE TWO OF THEM STEPPED CLOSER TO HIM. He couldn't tell much about them in the shadowy gloom of the parking lot, but they were both wearing suits. They came to a stop about six feet from him, keeping the guns trained on him, and one of them reached inside his coat with a free hand. It came back out holding a leather folder.

The man surprised Shayne by flipping the folder over to him. Shayne caught it automatically, and the man said in a low voice, "Before you start thinking about pulling some sort of grandstand play, take a look at that."

Shayne opened the folder and angled it so that he could see what was inside in the glow from a light in the corner of the lot. His bushy red eyebrows quirked upwards. "CIA?" he said, disbelief evident in his voice. "You two are supposed to be spooks?"

"That's right, Shayne. If you don't believe that, let me throw some names at you. I think you know some men named Jones and Jasper and Simmons."

Shayne took a deep breath and wished he could see their faces better. "What if I do?" he said in answer to the comment. "They don't work for the CIA."

"No, but we're all on the same side. How else would we know that you've met them?"

Shayne tossed the ID folder back to the man. "All right. I'll give you

the benefit of the doubt . . . for now. What the hell do you want with me? I'm sort of busy right now."

"I'll bet," the second one said, speaking for the first time. "Busy finding bodies."

"Tell us about that, Shayne," the first one said. "We hear you're mixed up in a murder."

"You hear things in a hurry," Shayne grunted. "I just found the body. An elevator door opened, and there he was."

"He was dead when you found him?"

Shayne frowned. "As a matter of fact, he wasn't. But he didn't say anything except Moreno's name." Shayne paused, then went on slowly, "Moreno . . . He wouldn't be why you boys are interested in this, would he?"

The second man grunted derisively, but the first one said after a moment, "You're supposed to be a discreet man, Shayne. Yeah, we're interested in Moreno. We're interested in anybody who works for Fidel who might be interested in changing sides."

Again Shayne's eyebrows arched. "Now it begins to make sense," he said. "You think Moreno might defect while he's here."

"He's been close to Castro for several years. He might have some pretty important things to tell us."

"And if Fidel is suspicious of him," Shayne speculated, "he might arrange for someone to kill Moreno here in Miami. Hell, if everything you hear is true, Castro has plenty of agents here to start with."

"You shouldn't have told him all that," the second one chided his companion. "There's such a thing as classified information, you know."

"Shayne can be trusted. Can't you, Shayne? Are you sure you don't know any more about the two attempts on Moreno's life tonight?"

Shayne shook his head. "I told the cops everything I knew about the first one, and this time I just stumbled in on it after it was over. Moreno can tell you a lot more about it than I can."

The CIA agent nodded. "We've got people in the hotel right now talking to him. We wanted to give him protection, but he won't hear of it."

Shayne nodded. "That would have made Castro sure that Moreno was going to defect. He may not have waited for that confirmation, though, from the looks of things."

"We'd appreciate any help you could give us on this, Shayne," the man said, disregarding the looks given him by his partner. He had evidently decided that Shayne was to be trusted fully. That might have been a compliment under other circumstances, but right now

Shayne had too much else on his mind to think about it.

And he had something else to do besides help the CIA with this Moreno business, too.

Something to do with Megan Collins and the Golden Queen

"Sorry," he bit off. The agents had lowered their guns, and now Shayne started to move past them. "I'm on another case, and it's all I can handle right now."

The first agent put out a hand and laid it on Shayne's arm. "You've helped the government in the past, Shayne."

"And I would again if I had the time. But right now I don't." He snapped the reply at them and shook off the hand. The second one growled something, but Shayne ignored him. He hurried on to his car without looking back at them.

AS HE DROVE AWAY FROM THE HOTEL, he thought about what they had told him. It was an intriguing situation. Someone like Moreno, someone with Castro's ear, might have very valuable information about what was going on in Cuba. And he might know what sort of plans Castro had in mind for the future. With the world situation what it was, and with Castro's penchant for involving Cuba with other countries, it would be well worth knowing just what he might be up to next. Shayne hoped that Moreno would defect, and that the police and the government agents could find and stop whoever was trying to kill him.

Shayne wheeled the Buick through streets that were lightly traveled at this hour of the morning. It didn't take him long to reach the area of the amphitheater. He pulled over before he got there, though, and glanced at his watch.

Hubert Vardon had had time to get there and clear the place out, sending the guards away so that he could wait for the kidnappers alone with the Golden Queen. Quite a bit of the hour that they had given Vardon was already gone. Shayne had hoped to be here sooner, but he hadn't expected to have a bloody, nearly-dead Cuban dropped almost in his lap, either.

Shayne got out of the Buick and walked along the sidewalk toward the amphitheater. When he was a couple of blocks away, he saw a group of men clustered on the sidewalk in front of an all-night diner. Most of them held cups of coffee, and he could hear the puzzled buzz of conversation among them.

One of them who knew him spotted the big redhead and exclaimed, "Hey, there's Mr. Shayne! What's goin' on, Mr. Shayne? You know why Vardon would run us out like that?"

Shayne shook his head as he walked up to them. "I can't really say, boys. Did he just order all of you out of the place?"

"That's right," one of the others said. "Told us he'd look out for the Golden Queen for a while, that he wanted to be alone. Kind of crazy, if you ask me. Vardon didn't look so good, either."

Shayne could believe that. He asked, "Has anyone else gone in since you left?"

There was a negative murmur from them. "Not that we saw," the first one said. He frowned at Shayne. "Say, what are you doin' down here at this hour of the morning, anyway? I thought you were supposed to be guarding that little blond kid."

Shayne opened his mouth to turn the question aside, but before he could say anything, they all heard the same sound.

It was a gunshot . . . and it came from inside the amphitheater.

SHAYNE WAS TEARING ACROSS THE STREET, pulling his gun from its holster, before any of the security guards had done anything except look shocked. But then they dropped their coffee cups and started after him.

Shayne hit the double glass entrance doors with his shoulder, slowing only slightly before he got there. They were unlocked, and he pushed through almost at a dead run. Another shot echoed through the dark lobby of the building. Shayne thought he could tell which of the corridors leading out into the seats it had come from, so he swerved in that direction.

Something loomed up in front of him as he charged into the aisle between two sections of seats. The floor sloped gently downwards in front of him, sloped all the way to the stage where Shayne caught a glimpse of Hubert Vardon, lying motionless. He didn't have time to worry about Vardon, though. The shape in front of him cursed in fluent Spanish, and a gun blasted almost in Shayne's face.

He threw himself to the side as the other man plowed into him. Shayne lashed out with his gun but didn't connect. They struggled in the darkness, seconds stretching out longer than they really were, and then Shayne heard other footsteps pounding toward him. He thought that the security guards had arrived.

He was wrong.

Shayne shoved his opponent away, some instinct making him turn. He saw the second man coming at him, saw the man lift something bulky and swing it at him

Shayne tried to drop out of the way of the blow, but he was an instant too slow. The object clipped him on top of the head, sending him falling

the rest of the way to the floor as rockets went off in his brain. He felt the gun slip out of his fingers and heard it clattering away, then the darkened amphitheater seemed to get absolutely stygian for a few seconds. Shayne finally got his hands under him and pushed himself up unsteadily. Before he could get all the way up, hands grabbed him and jerked him upright.

Shayne started to throw a punch, then realized that the man holding him was wearing a uniform. It was one of the security guards. Shayne shook his head and said, "Did you grab them?"

"Who?" the man asked. "We heard somebody running off, but they were gone before we could catch up to them."

"Never mind," Shayne grunted. He felt even worse now, after this second clout on the head in a few hours, but even so, he was almost glad that his shadowy attackers had gotten away. He was sure they were the kidnappers, and if they had managed to make it out of there with the statue, they might release Megan unharmed yet. Shayne was also sure that it had been the Golden Queen that the second man had used to wallop him, and he couldn't keep an ironic grin from tugging at the corners of his mouth for a second, even under the strain of the situation.

He remembered Hubert Vardon then, and his eyes jerked to the stage. He saw one of the guards helping Vardon to his feet; the old man wasn't dead after all, and Shayne felt relief at that fact, too.

SHAYNE HURRIED DOWN THE AISLE and vaulted onto the stage with a lot more energy than he really felt. Vardon was standing in the center of the stage with the help of the guard. As Shayne approached, he didn't see any wounds on the older man.

"Are you all right, Vardon?" he asked as he came up. "Were you hit by any of those shots?"

Vardon shook his head slowly. "No, I'm fine. He pushed me down . . . I suppose I'm even older than I thought I was." His eyes locked with Shayne's. "I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne. When he started to leave with the Golden Queen, I suppose I just lost my head. I tried to stop him. I didn't even think about that little girl."

One of the other guards called from backstage, "Hey, the Queen's gone! Get on the phone to the cops!"

Vardon looked at the guard who was helping support him and said, "I'm all right now, Bruce. You can go help the others."

"All right, Mr. Vardon," the man said. "If you knew there was going to be trouble, you shouldn't have sent us off like that."

"I know," Vardon said wearily. "But I really had no choice, you see."

The guard left Shayne and Vardon alone, and the two of them exchanged a long look. Shayne grunted, "Sorry. Things happened, and I really botched this one up. If Megan Collins lives through this, she's got you to thank, not me."

"I think we were beaten from the start," Vardon said. "And I never should have tried to stop those men. I just put Megan in danger, and I never could have overpowered them. The one on the stage was much bigger than I am, and the one waiting out in the audience had a gun. He's the one who shot at me when I tried to attack the other one."

"Could you tell anything about them?" Shayne asked.

Vardon shook his head. "They were wearing dark clothes, and they had masks on. Like ski masks; everything was covered but the eyes. I'm afraid the masks muffled their voices, too. Actually, though, I only heard one of them speak, the one who took the Queen from me."

Shayne fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes from a pocket and found one that was in halfway decent shape. As he lit it, he said, "I was going to try to follow them when they left here, but I didn't get set up in time. Now I suppose we wait for them to call and tell us where to find Megan."

"Isn't there anything else we can do, anything that might lead us to them?"

SHAYNE BLEW SMOKE TOWARD THE CEILING AND FROWNED. His hand strayed up to tug at his ear. Something was bothering him. So much had happened so quickly, and it was hard to keep everything straight. But he had a feeling that he had seen *something* during the night that wasn't right, and that it was something that should have told him what he needed to know to crack this case. He couldn't pull it out from the jumble of things in his head, though.

"I wish there was something we could do," he said to Vardon. His face twisted in disgust. He paced back and forth for a few moments, then stopped, closed his eyes, and sighed. This was getting him nowhere. He asked idly, "Why did you decide to hold this chess match in Miami in the first place?"

"Because it was convenient for *Senor* Moreno, basically," Vardon answered. "And he *is* the world champion right now. I don't believe he'll hold that title for long, though. Megan will take it away from —" He broke off awkwardly as he realized what he was saying.

Shayne was interested, though. "You think she's better than he is?"

"Undoubtedly," Vardon nodded. "He may be leading in this match,

but Megan has been terribly distracted by all the trouble that's been surrounding her, those first kidnap attempts and everything. Why, no one could play their best chess with that on their mind. Moreno knows it, too." He was warming to his subject now, all the problems of the night momentarily forgotten. "He tricked her tonight with that Newcomb maneuver, and he got away with it only because he has more experience than she does. Why, judging by the moves she's made so far in the match, she could very well win it . . . My God, what am I saying? This match is over. The rest of it will be cancelled, of course, no matter what happens. It's a shame. I really believe Megan could have beaten Moreno."

"I guess we'll never know, will we?" Shayne said. He was still playing with that uneasy feeling of having the answer right in front of him. He stared out at the rows and rows of empty, dark seats.

"Capablanca was Cuban, too, you know," Vardon said.

Shayne glanced at him. "The Humphrey Bogart movie?"

"Oh, no." Vardon allowed a tiny smile to come to his lips. "Jose Capablanca. He was a world champion during the Twenties, one of the grand masters of all time. I know practically every one of his important games by heart."

Shayne wasn't breathing.

He was thinking. He knew now, suddenly, what he had seen that should have been important to him at the time. Maybe it wasn't too late, though, maybe he could still clear this whole thing up—

"Mr. Shayne, what is it?" Vardon asked anxiously. "Are you all right? You look like you've had a terrible shock."

"Just a little knowledge," Shayne answered, spinning and heading for the edge of the stage.

"Where are you going?" Vardon called after him.

"To find Megan Collins," Shayne replied without looking back. He didn't know for sure where she was, not yet, anyway. But now he had a place to start looking.

And a killer to deal with . . .

V

SHAYNE WASN'T SURE WHAT HE WOULD FIND when he got back to the hotel. It wouldn't have surprised him if it was still crawling with cops and government agents. But things seemed to have quieted down. He saw no evidence of any trouble as he once more used a rear door to slip in unobtrusively.

He went over things in his mind one more time as he rode upstairs

in the elevator. It all still fit together. There was a grim smile on his face as the elevator came to a stop on the floor he wanted. When the doors slid open, he walked quickly down the hall until he reached the door he was looking for. His bony knuckles rapped on it sharply.

A voice called through the door and asked who it was. The big detective replied, "Mike Shayne." A second later, he heard the chain being taken off and the latch clicked back. The door swung open.

Shayne put the barrel of his pistol in Raul Moreno's throat and said, "Where's the girl?"

Moreno gasped and stammered, "*Senor* Shayne! What — what —"

The slender Cuban was still dressed in slacks and shirt, as he had been when Shayne saw him earlier. The cut on his face had been bandaged, though. Shayne applied some pressure with the gun barrel, forcing Moreno back into the suite. Shayne followed, kicking the door shut behind him with his heel.

"The only thing I care about right now is Megan," Shayne grated. "So unless you can tell me she's all right, I don't have one damn reason not to pull this trigger."

Moreno must have recognized the look in Shayne's eyes. He said quickly, "I never meant for her to come to harm. She is fine, *Senor* Shayne, I swear it. She was not to be touched, and by now my friends should be releasing her."

"Where?"

Moreno was breathing rapidly and with some difficulty, due to the pistol barrel in his throat. He said in a whine, "In Biscayne Park, near the entrance. You must believe me!"

Shayne was silent for a long moment, staring at Moreno, then he said, "I believe you. You know I'd kill you if you didn't tell the truth." He jerked the gun away from the Cuban's throat suddenly and slashed at him with it, laying it up alongside Moreno's temple. Moreno groaned and slumped to the floor.

Shayne kept the gun trained on him while he picked up the phone with his other hand and got the hotel operator to put him through to Will Gentry's home number. When the burly chief answered sleepily, Shayne rapped, "It's me, Will. Listen close. Megan Collins, the little girl in the chess match, was kidnapped a few hours ago. The people who have her will be releasing her close to the entrance of Biscayne Park shortly, if they haven't already. They've also got that statue that was the prize in the match, the Golden Queen. That was the ransom. Getting the girl back is the important thing, though." Shayne grinned as Gentry's excited voice came back at him. He went on, "I know it's complicated, Will, but take my word for it. Just get some men out to

the park right away, and tell them to be careful. Oh, by the way, I've got the man who killed that Cuban national with a knife earlier. He was responsible for the one that got shot, too. It's Raul Moreno, the other chess player. We're in his room at the hotel."

MORENO WAS STIRRING NOW, SITTING UP WITH HATE BURNING in his eyes as Shayne hung up to let Gentry get busy. Moreno said slowly, "You are crazy, *Senor* Shayne."

Shayne shook his head. "I don't think so. You see, I know our government believes you want to defect while you're here. But that's not it at all, is it? You know if you defected, your old friend Fidel would send someone after you. It's much better for you if you just disappear so that neither Castro or our people know where to find you. To do that, though, you'd need plenty of money. Say, half a million in the form of a Golden Queen."

Moreno stood up carefully, not wanting to alarm Shayne. He said, "I wanted to win the match and the prize, yes. But I am no traitor to Fidel and my country."

"Then why did you kill that man earlier?"

"I told you, a man came in with a knife —"

"Forget it," Shayne snarled. "That guy was a security man, sent here both to guard you and to keep you from going over to the other side. He was a watchdog, the same as the other one you arranged to have shot earlier. The sniper was probably supposed to get both of them then, but you hadn't counted on me being there to return his fire. So you had to improvise later on and take the second one out with a knife. He put up more of a fight than you thought he would, though. Even fatally wounded, he managed to knock you out and then stagger down to the elevator looking for help."

Moreno was looking more wild-eyed now. "There is no way you can know this."

"I know the guy was a watchdog, like I said. And there's no way he would have gone to answer the door unarmed, especially after the sniping earlier. I saw him just before he died, though, and he wasn't wearing any kind of weapon. He had to have been attacked here in the suite, when he wasn't expecting it . . . Attacked by you."

"I should have won," Moreno breathed. "I am the world's champion. No mere child should be able to defeat me, even in one game!"

"You wanted insurance of that, though," Shayne said tightly. "You must've been falling out of favor with Fidel. You've been planning to cut and run for quite a while, haven't you? This challenge match was just the thing to finance it. So you had your accomplices who

were already here in the States pull a couple of stunts to shake Megan up, make sure she couldn't concentrate on the match enough to beat you. But she was going to do it anyway, wasn't she? She had you beat, Moreno, and you knew it. That's why you had your people go ahead and actually kidnap her this time."

"You can prove none of this." Moreno was trying to sound calm but not succeeding very well.

"What about when the cops catch up to the people working with you? Do you think they'll take all the heat themselves? They'll burn you, Moreno."

"I am not an American. Your police have no right to hold me —"

"You want to go back to Cuba?" Shayne cut in, a tigerish smile on his lean face. "Do you think you can keep this little escapade quiet for long? Do you think Fidel won't find out about it?" Shayne shook his head. "Think again, Moreno. In Cuba, you're a dead man for sure."

Moreno was pale and sweating now, seeing the truth in Shayne's words. It was prison in the United States or death in Cuba. Those would be his only choices . . .

THE TELEPHONE RANG.

Shayne snatched it up and put it to his ear, said, "Shayne." An excited voice came over the wire.

"Mr. Shayne! Mike! Chief Gentry told me where you are. Megan's safe, Mike! The police have her. She's safe!"

"I'm glad to hear it, Sandra," Shayne grinned, keeping an eye on Moreno as he listened to Sandra Collins' exuberant news. "What happened?"

"Chief Gentry called and said you told him where to find Megan. His men got there just as the kidnappers were releasing her. They let her get away from the kidnappers, then closed in on them. The police captured them without anyone getting hurt."

"That's good," Shayne said. "There's been enough death tonight. Moreno was behind it, Sandra. It's a long story, so I'll save it to tell to you and Megan later, all right?"

"All right." Sandra heaved a sigh of relief. "Are you okay? Chief Gentry said he had men on the way to the hotel, too. They should be there any time."

"Thanks for letting me know about Megan," Shayne said. "I'll see both of you in a little while, if you don't mind a late visitor. I don't think you'll be needing my services as a bodyguard anymore."

"Maybe not, but you'd better come see us, as soon as you can. Megan should be getting here soon, too, the police were going to bring

her. They're taking the Golden Queen back to Mr. Vardon, too."

So the Queen was safe, too, Shayne mused. That wrapped it all up.

Shayne said his goodbyes and hung up. Moreno was standing several feet away, surly and silent, watching the gun that was trained on him by a rock-steady hand. Shayne told him, "The cops will be here any second. They'll take over from there."

The door to the suite opened and a voice said, "I'm afraid not, Shayne."

Shayne's eyes flicked away from Moreno. The CIA man, the one who had seemed to be the leader when Shayne encountered the pair on the parking lot earlier, stood there. There was a gun in his hand, too.

And it was pointed right at Shayne's head.

"What is this?" Shayne demanded, eyes narrowing in surprise.

"The police won't be coming just yet," the agent said. "My partner is downstairs now stalling them. Moreno is coming with us, Shayne."

Shayne kept his gun on the Cuban. He started shaking his head. "I don't think so. He murdered one man personally, set up another one to be killed, and had a little girl kidnapped and she and her mother terrorized. He's got a lot to answer for."

"Maybe so, but he also knows a lot of things that we'd like to know." The agent looked over at Moreno. "How about it, Moreno? Come over to our side, and we'll quash this trouble and set you up with a new identity. You'll be safe enough."

Moreno began to nod eagerly. "Yes, yes. I will do whatever you say. I want to get out of here."

"That's just what we'll do," the agent promised. "Put your gun down, Shayne. Give it up. You don't have any choice, unless you want to shoot it out with me. And that'll put you on the wrong side of the law."

There was a bitter taste in Shayne's mouth like none he had ever experienced before. He tried to swallow it, but it wouldn't go away. He took a long breath, then set his gun down on the table next to the telephone.

"That's good, Shayne," the agent nodded. "Come on, Moreno. We'll go out the back wa —"

MORENO WAS MOVING, LEAPING FORWARD, his arm lashing out in a whipping blow. The side of his hand crashed into the agent's arm, knocking the gun loose. A knee in the groin made the agent double over in agony. The sudden attack had taken him completely by surprise. Shayne saw Moreno bend, his long fingers wrapping around the butt of the fallen gun.

The Cuban spun, the gun coming up and around. Shayne's hand dropped, picking his own gun up. Moreno's face twisted in a snarl of rage and hate as his finger started to tighten on the trigger.

Shayne shot him in the right eye.

The bullet slammed Moreno back against the open door, the gun in his hand blasting wildly. His nerveless body fell, sprawling across the agent, who was struggling to get back to his feet. Moreno rolled to the side, limp and lifeless, his last gambit played and lost.

Shayne's eyes met those of the agent. "I guess he knew Fidel would never forget," Shayne said slowly. "He still wanted to cut and run." He looked down at the gun in his hand. "I guess you can do whatever you want to me now."

"I would have been next, after he killed you," the agent said. "There'll always be other defectors, Shayne. Give me a hand here, will you?"

Shayne put his gun away and went to help the agent. Then he wanted to get back to the Collins' suite, so that he could be there when Megan arrived. He had a lot to tell them.

Shayne lifted the agent to his feet. He said, "Can I get out of here now? I was thinking I might get somebody I know to teach me how to play chess."

"Yeah," the agent nodded. "Get out of here, Shayne . . . and thanks."

Shayne grinned. On the table was a chess board, set out in the middle of a game that Moreno must have been studying sometime during the night. Shayne reached out, put a blunt finger on the black king, and pushed it over. Checkmate . . .

Next month Mike Shayne returns in

THE MEDICI CASKET
by Brett Halliday

Don't miss it!

They were here, most of the great villains of literature, and Professor Moriarty was anxious to get on with the meeting. But they must wait for the archest villain of them all — the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu!

Children Of The Night

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

"All right, Moriarty," Caspar Gutman bellowed, stomach bulging against the circular edge of the conference table. "Do get on with it, Sir. Let's re-enamel the bird, shall we say?"

Professor Moriarty, his spade beard jutting like a dark revolver, stared down the length of the crowded room. His cold eyes glinted, as if envisioning the conquest of all London. The *Baedeker* guide in his hands was held firmly.

"In a moment, my dear Gutman. We seem to be missing a colleague. One I choose to wait for prior to discussion."

The midnight meeting place of *Villains, Incorporated*, now buzzed with comment. Overt and *sotto voce*. Like all rooms of the imagination, it was high, vaulted and permeated with trailing vapors and wisps of odd-tinted fog. There were no windows. Gaslight flickered. Tall shadows, cast by the men all sitting in high-backed wooden chairs all about the mahogany table, climbed like erratic church spires on the gloomy walls.

"Who's not here?" snarled Dimitrios Makroupalos from his coffin-shaped chair. His oily face, mustached and malevolent, was twisted with anger. "By Smyrna, I'll not wait for some late-running carrion to come on time. I've got an important assignation with *Herr* Grodek and Colonel Haki is yapping like a dog at my heels this very minute —"

"Silence!" Professor Moriarty intoned haughtily. "I am chairing this meeting. I will say when we will discuss your problems with the good Colonel, dear Makroupalos. I now say, we are missing a colleague."

"Who?" Auric Goldfinger demanded peevishly from his side of the table. "You surely aren't expecting Mr. Sherlock Holmes or his illus-

trious imitation; Solar Pons, my dear *Herr* Professor? Or is it James Bond — whom I assure you I have no desire ever to meet again!"

"I do not choose to discuss Holmes," Moriarty said stiffly. "Nor that Double-Oh-Seven acquaintance of yours. Isn't it obvious to you all that our Chinese friend is not here? How can we possibly continue without the eminent Dr. Fu Manchu?"

All villainous heads now swung to the curved chair where the Mandarin of Menace had always roosted, his long-nailed fingers clasped in dreamy repose while his slitted-almond eyes dwelled on the latest in torture methods. It was all too true. The Manchu's chair was empty.

"That's queer," Jack The Ripper muttered. "The blasted Chinaman's never been late before. Unless the Yard's really got him hopping it. Nayland Smith's a caution." He ran a thumb along the shining blade of the knife in his right hand.

"Curious," Waldo Lydecker agreed, his impeccable carnation and flambuoyant weskit as intact as ever. "Unless he met a female as attractive as my dear Laura, I don't see what could have detained the Oriental monster."

Brigid O'Shaughnessy, the only woman allowed in the room, giggled derisively. Her magnetic face sparkled across the table at the fat Lydecker who was nearly as ponderously huge as Gutman.

"Waldo — you still haven't learned that the female of the species is more deadly than the male? Tsk, tsk."

"And you, my dear," Lydecker murmured frostily, "have not learned to call a spade a spade. Or should Sam play you again?"

Professor Moriarty tapped for silence with a gavel.

"Let's call the roll once more. If Fu Manchu doesn't put in an appearance by the time we have done, then on with the meeting. We do have a quorum, at least."

There was a collective mutter of assent.

"Auric Goldfinger."

"Here!"

Caspar Gutman."

"Here, Sir, and I wish I wasn't."

"Dimitrios Makroupalos."

"Here in my coffin."

"Waldo Lydecker."

"Oh, indubitably here."

"The Ripper."

"At your service, Professor."

"Miss O'Shaughnessy."

"My, yes. Tee hee."

"James Osborne."

"I suppose so." This from a faded and worn man of forty-five, idly rotating a Chinese Orange — a tangerine — in his hands.

"Dr. Fu Manchu."

Silence. Professor Moriarty frowned and hurried on, reading from the parchment strip of membership in his right hand.

"Count Dracula."

"Ah, of course!" The good Count, splendidly turned out in Inverness cloak and darkness, smiled his bloodless smile.

"Baron Von Frankenstein."

"Present, but I don't really belong here as you all know," the earnest young scientist blurted imploringly. "Truly, you should boot me out of the organization for false pretenses —"

Moriarty ignored him, continuing blandly.

"There is not time now, Baron, please. We will discuss your credentials on another day. Now, where were we? Oh, yes — the Judge?"

An agreeable-faced man, kindly and venerable, nodded with deep majesty. "Oh, that this too solid flesh might melt . . ." Moriarty shrugged. The Judge was forever making judgments, as if he were eternally on the bench or isolated on some nameless island with ten lost souls, playing judge, jury and executioner.

"George Broughm?"

"Here, Professor," said a military-faced man with a curious twitch near one eye. The man was oddly intent on a long sheet before him on the table. The list of Adrian Messenger, no less. Poor Broughm. He had never been done with that list, thanks to Colonel Anthony Gethryn.

Now, the Professor's list had dwindled down to one last name.

Two, to tell the truth and shame the Devils.

"Dr. Jekyll. Mr. Hyde?"

A hairy-faced man, huddled and somehow animalistically crouched alongside Waldo Lydecker, growled his reply. Lydecker sniffed and turned his chair the other way. Professor Moriarty dropped the parchment scroll on the table before him and rested his weight on his hands as he stared keenly at the midnight gathering of *Villains, Incorporated*. The *Baedeker* was forgotten. The gavel, too.

"Very well, then. All present and accounted for. Save for our Chinese colleague. But time will not permit any further delay. As you all know, the important day is at hand. We must discuss this pressing issue before us. We've tabled the matter far too often, I should think. Our immortality as villains in a world of Make-Believe. *Literature*, some choose to call it. Now, what is to be done about it? What *can*

we do? I for one should like to rest my case forever. I weary of hearing my good name forever linked with that infernal meddler from 221B Baker Street. I'm sure you must all feel as I do? Haven't we endured this long enough — this unmitigated, unrelenting association-of-identities? Mr. Goldfinger and James Bond. Makroupalos there and Colonel Haki. Poor Broughm and Colonel Anthony Gethryn. Osborne there and that pesky Yankee Doodle Dandy named Ellery Queen! And what of Gutman and Miss O'Shaughnessy and Sam Spade's Maltese Falcon caper of theirs — oh, well. Why go on? The question is now put before this Board. The Chair is now open to suggestions."

A pink hand shot up. Moriarty bowed. "Miss O'Shaughnessy?"

Brigid O'Shaughnessy did not rise. She twisted a small, purple kerchief between her dainty fingers. Coyly, almost.

"It hasn't been bad for *me*. Not really. I mean — Sam Spade was the best man in his class. I never had much before I met him. I was an orphan at five, before I ran across Mr. Gutman and Joel Cairo — I hardly even smoked cigarettes or got into trouble of any kind —"

Caspar Gutman thundered like an enraged bull. "Blast the woman, Sir! Look at her. Daughter of Evil. Not to be trusted, no, Sir. What matters her opinion? She gained stature by mingling with her betters. Mr. Spade, rest him. By Gad, there was a character, Sir!"

Moriarty quickly regained his gavel, tapping loudly.

"Please. Dispense with these side issues. We want constructive thinking. Yes, Mr. Lydecker?"

Waldo Lydecker shrugged like Pontius Pilate washing his hands of the entire business of Jerusalem.

"I fail to see how anything we may decide here tonight or any other night is going to alter the situation. Laura has been the face in the misty night for years now. Thanks to the movie and the song they made from the book. If I had truly blasted Laura with that shotgun hidden in the clock instead of allowing Mark MacPherson of New York's Homicide Department to entrap me, well — no use crying over spilled Luras, is there? I'm afraid we are saddled with our respective and collective fates, dear Professor. Linked with the great names of mystery and detection."

"No," Jekyll-Hyde roared, rising. "It isn't fair! First I'm a handsome, respectable physician and then I'm ugly and loathsome. All because of a concoction in a glass. And those movies and those bloody sons-of-daughters-of things! Let me rest. No great detective trapped me. Not even my good friend Lanyon —"

Count Dracula chuckled, ghoulishly.

"I cannot feel as you do, my dear young colleague. To the vampire,

re-newed Life is everything. Van Hel-sing understood that. Is that not so, dear Baron Von Frankenstein?"

"Don't talk to me, you accursed fiend," young Frankenstein whimpered, glancing sympathetically at Jekyll-Hyde. "You're no better than your Ripper friend there. Ghouls, the pair of you. I was a scientist. A genuine scientist!"

Jack The Ripper glowered, pointing the knife. Gaslight flickered along the terrible blade.

"Don't play the toff with me, Frankie. You could get hurt that way. Very hurt, mind. The Yard couldn't stop me. Neither can you."

Professor Moriarty pounded the gavel loudly. The group quieted down, muttering, still argumentative. The genial-faced Judge smiled mockingly. Broughm's *tic* danced above his eye. The list of Adrian Messenger still seemed to hold his attention, though. Goldfinger snorted impatiently, rolling a golden sovereign between his chubby thumb and forefinger. James Osborne continued to rotate the tangerine, looking more faded and forlorn than ever. Dimitrios was shaking his head, murmuring Greek oaths under his breath.

Finally, he erupted.

"I told you all! Throw in with me and Grodek. He needs spy labor. A few throats cut. Several documents stolen. We could all make a fortune in *drachmas* —"

"None of that," Moriarty cut him off, sharply. "Remember. We all have a common bond. To remove ourselves from association with these mortifying fictional super-detectives. I absolutely refuse to stay immortal between the pages of thrillers. Penny dreadfuls. 'Tec' nonsense, my associates. I prefer not to entertain unborn generations of mystery readers by being the eternal *nogoodnik* brought to bay by the detective hero. Now — does any one of you have one constructive idea, so we can escape our awful fate?"

The Judge stirred, oratorical lips parting.

"*He went out and hanged himself and then there were none . . .* frankly, I feel rather differently. I should liked to have pitted my wits against Hercules Poirot. In another book, perhaps . . ."

Moriarty sighed, ignoring him. "If only Manchu was here. That devilishly cunning brain might think of something exotic —"

He had to pause. A red light somewhere on the darkened wall behind him had flashed. Once, twice, three times. The signal of entrance from without. Known only to the dread membership. "Ah! Now he comes. Good. Perhaps we shall have our answer, after all — I'm sure of it —"

All eyes in the room turned to the oblong door atop the stone stair-

case leading down into the vaulted room. It was sliding open. The padding, muffled figure of the Man From The East, easily recognizable by them all, glided down the stone stairway. Brigid O'Shaughnessy immediately began to powder her nose. Each villain tensed expectantly in their chairs as the yellow, sinister face of Dr. Fu Manchu drew closer to the table. All could now see the woebegone, sad expression drooping the Oriental mask.

"My dear Fu," Moriarty said, with some alarm. "You seem out of sorts —" Broughm's twitching eye was dancing like a snake, now. Osborne stopped rotating the tangerine, frowning.

"Alas, yes." The sing-song answer rose in almost a plaintive cry. "I changed carriages all of three times but I could not dodge his relentless pursuit. His knowledge of the London streets is far greater than that of any mere cabman —"

"Who — Nayland Smith?" Moriarty whirled back toward the stairway, his hand producing a Webley pistol from his waistband. There was no one else on the darkened passage. Too late he became aware of the rustling movement behind him, the rising chorus of fright and alarm from the gentlemen seated at the round conference table.

Turning, he found himself face-to-face with the hawkish, unforgettable countenance of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, looming from beneath the mandarin hat of Fu Manchu. The Oriental make-up, no more than a life-like mask now riding beneath Holmes' pointed chin, dangling from its ear-loops, was the final mockery.

A matching Webley jutted from the detective's clenched fist.

"Professor Moriarty!" Holmes crackled. "You are all under my arrest! Yourself and the rest of these arch fiends! Manchu is now in irons and Lestrade and his fine men are waiting without, along with my good friend, Dr. Watson, to guide you to the dock."

Moriarty sighed, a long sigh, refusing to blanch in the face of defeat, once more. Eternal defeat. He raised his hands, turning back to his assembled colleagues. The man of a thousand disguises had duped him. The mixture, as before.

"As you see," he said sadly. "Mr. Sherlock Holmes. It is always Holmes. Until the end. . . ."

Gutman, Dimitrios Makroupalos, Waldo Lydecker, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, The Judge, James Osborne, George Broughm, The Ripper, Count Dracula, Jekyll-Hyde and even Baron Von Frankenstein, all shuddered in unison. Auric Goldfinger had fainted dead away.

Even without the cape, the deerstalker cap, the tall form of Sherlock Holmes cast a giant shadow across the table.

I had dropped my own gun, and now the muzzle of the rifle jammed into my stomach. I knew suddenly that all I had done was get myself killed!

War Games

by JAMES M.
REASONER

THE PLACE REMINDED ME OF AN IVY LEAGUE PREP SCHOOL. Not that I had ever seen such a place in person, but it just looked like the kind of place that Holden Caulfield had made his escape from. There were a lot of red brick buildings scattered around the campus, and a swimming pool and tennis courts sat at the bottom of the hill. The most dominant feature, the thing I had seen first, was a tall tower sitting almost exactly in the center of the campus. As I got closer, I could see a bell inside it.

I could also see that there was a high fence around the whole place, topped off with barbed wire, and the only opening I saw was guarded by a gatehouse.

The gate itself was closed. I pulled up in front of it and decided to wait a second before I started tapping the Ford's horn. The door of the gatehouse swung open and a big man came out. He was wearing a green uniform and cap, and for a second, I was surprised that he didn't have an M-1 slung over his shoulder.

He opened the gate and came out. I rolled down the car window, letting in some of the crisp October air, and said, "I'm here to see Colonel Rutledge. My name is Markham."

"You a parent?" the guy rumbled.

I was tempted to give him a smart answer like "Not that I know of," but he looked so grim I doubted he would get it. So I said, "No. Colonel Rutledge called me and asked me to come see him, though."

The guard pulled a sheet of paper out of his shirt pocket and scanned it. He must have found my name on it, because he nodded his head and said, "Okay. The Colonel's office is in the administration building. It's right across the green from the bell tower."

I nodded and said thanks. He stepped back and let me drive on through the gate, then swung it shut behind me. I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw him locking it.

I HAD NEVER HEARD OF THE RUTLEDGE MILITARY ACADEMY until ten o'clock that morning, when its founder, owner, and superintendent, Colonel Anthony Rutledge (Ret.), had called me at my L.A. office and asked me to drive up. I had asked him why the head of a military school would need a private detective, and he had told me that somebody wanted to kill him. Then he told me what he would pay me to find out who the somebody was, and now here I was, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the sight of the closed, locked gate.

Finding the administration building was no trouble, and there were plenty of places to park my car. I locked it up and left it, then walked across a lawn that was still green despite the nip in the air into the massive brick building. It was early afternoon, and there wasn't much going on inside. My footsteps echoed a little bit as I went down a big central hall.

There was an information desk at the far end of it. A boy in uniform sat behind it, a chemistry book propped up in front of him. He looked glad of the interruption as I asked, "Excuse me, where would I find Colonel Rutledge's office?"

I put the boy's age at fifteen. He had a face that was just starting to clear up and dark hair cut very close to the head. He gave me a perfunctory smile and said, "At the top of the stairs, sir. Dead ahead."

"That's a navy term, son. I thought the emphasis here was army."

His smile tightened. "All the services are the same, sir, in certain respects."

I couldn't argue with him, since I'd never been in any of them. I said, "Thank you," and went on up the staircase.

There was a heavy wooden door at the top of it, with no name on it. I knocked, and another boy's voice said, "Come in."

This one was a little older, seventeen maybe, with sandy hair cut just as short as the one downstairs. His smile was quite a bit friendlier, though. He stood up behind a desk and said, "Yes, sir, how can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Colonel Rutledge." There was another door across the room, and I was betting that Rutledge was behind it.

The boy nodded and said, "Your name, sir?"

"Markham. I've got an appointment."

He nodded again. He was an agreeable kid. But he did consult an appointment book on the desk before he stepped over to the other door and knocked on it respectfully.

A voice came from inside and barked, "Come in!" The boy opened the door, snapped to attention, threw a salute that looked crisp to my untrained eye, and barked back, "Mr. Markham to see you, *sir!*"

He stepped back to let me into the room. When I went in, I saw another big desk, and a man behind it who was standing up to greet me. He extended a hand, which I shook, and said, "Good to see you, Markham. I'm Colonel Anthony Rutledge."

HE WAS A LARGE MAN, MAYBE AN INCH TALLER THAN ME and twenty pounds heavier. His skin was burned in the kind of deep tan that never goes away, and his face was broad and open. His hair was white, but it was still all there. He was in his late fifties or early sixties, but his grip was a strong one.

He let go of my hand, looked over my shoulder at the boy, and said, "That's all, soldier. Dismissed."

I sat down in a comfortable chair in front of the desk as the boy went out and shut the door. Rutledge settled back in his chair, clasped his hands together, and frowned at me. I wondered if I was out of uniform. I could see the bell tower through the window behind him.

"Could I see the note?" I asked.

"Of course." He opened a drawer in the desk and took out a piece of paper. When he handed it to me, I saw that the message was made up of letters cut out of newspapers and magazines. It was the first time I'd ever seen such a note, except on television, of course.

Whoever had made it had gone to a lot of trouble. The message read *The time has come! Death to cowards! The Colonel must die! Dishonor must be punished!*

I wondered where the hell he had gotten all the exclamation points.

I was handling the note carefully, even though I knew it was very unlikely that anyone could get any fingerprints off of it. I looked up at Rutledge and asked, "Are you sure you don't want to turn this over to the cops?"

"Not yet. I'd like to know who sent it first."

"All right. Tell me about it. Where did you find it?"

"It was in my middle desk drawer when I arrived this morning. At first I thought it was a joke of some sort, but then I realized that even if it is a joke, it's much too serious a matter to pass off. I called a

friend of mine on the Los Angeles force and asked him to recommend a private investigator."

I nodded. "Do you think it really is a joke, or do you think someone intends to kill you?"

He smiled tightly. "They may intend to try. I assure you, they won't succeed." I knew that the confidence he expressed was in himself, not in me.

"All right. If you want me to, I'll try to find out who put this note in your desk. I may not be able to prove that whoever it was really intends to kill you, though."

He waved a hand. "That doesn't matter, Markham. You just find out who, and I'll handle it from there." He smiled again, his lips drawing down into a thin line as he did so.

I wondered what he had in mind. A firing squad at dawn?

It didn't matter whether I liked the guy or not; he had a legitimate job for me to do, and if someone really was trying to kill him, I would have to do what I could to stop it.

"Do you have any ideas about who may have been responsible for the note? Somebody with a grudge against you?"

He took another piece of paper from the desk. "I've been thinking about that very thing," he said. "Here are the names of three people. I think you should start your investigation with them."

He handed the paper to me and I scanned the names. None of them meant anything to me, but then I hadn't expected them to.

"Who are they?"

"Jeffrey Woolard." Rutledge held up one finger. "A student here until recently. I had to expel him." The second finger came up. "Curtis Tate. One of our instructors. I've had trouble with him lately, and I may have to dismiss him." The third finger. "Ben Gerard. A local boy, not a student here. He's been involved in quite a bit of trouble, fights with our boys and such. I believe he and Woolard are friends, however."

It was a place to start. I asked, "Where will I find these three?"

He looked at his watch. "Tate will be over at Jefferson Hall. He's teaching a class right now, but it'll be over in about twenty minutes. As far as Woolard and Gerard go, I assume you find them in town somewhere. Woolard is from Pennsylvania, but when I expelled him, he decided to stay in this area. His parents are upset that he didn't come home, but he's eighteen, and there's nothing I can do about that. I've seen him and Gerard together several times recently."

"You said that Gerard had been in fights with your students. How do the town kids feel about the kids from the academy?"

"There is some ill-feeling, I suppose." He seemed to dislike admitting it. "It's all due to lack of discipline. Children today aren't used to living by rules, and they despise anyone who is well-disciplined." His fist came down hard on the desk.

I knew it was a mistake to disagree with him, but I couldn't stop myself from saying, "Oh, I don't know . . ."

"Were you in the Army?" he snapped. "Vietnam?"

"No. My knee got torn up playing ball."

"You don't know anything about real discipline, then." He held up a hand, palm out. "Not that you aren't a good investigator. You have a good reputation in your field. I checked you out, believe me."

I believed him.

"You probably had strict parents, at least," he went on. "I'm sure you didn't grow up utterly unsupervised, free to do anything you wanted, completely lacking any moral code, like the young people today."

"Yes, my parents were strict," I admitted to him. "My father was a police sergeant."

Rutledge smiled, with a little more warmth this time. "So you come by it honestly."

I didn't tell him that I hadn't given a damn about becoming a policeman like my father had wanted me to. No point in shattering his illusions while I was still working for him.

He stood up and went over to a large wooden glass-fronted bookcase standing on one wall. The only book in it was a little leather-bound diary with a snap on it. It had been converted into a gun cabinet and trophy case. He pointed to a rifle and a .45 automatic inside. "I carried those in the Battle of the Bulge, Markham. I'm damned proud of them and the men I killed with them." He turned to face me. "So you can see why I'm not afraid of this craven coward who sent me the note. If and when he comes for me, I would take great pleasure in breaking his neck with my bare hands."

I suddenly wanted very much to be out of this room, away from this man.

I stood up. "I'll get right to work on it. You'll be hearing from me as soon as I learn anything."

He nodded to me grimly. He was still standing in front of the gun cabinet, spine straight and shoulders back. Damned if he wasn't posing. I got out of there.

I STOPPED LONG ENOUGH TO INTRODUCE MYSELF to the boy in the other room. He glanced over to make sure that the door to the inner

office was closed, and then shook hands with me. "Glad to meet you, sir. My name is Allen Jarvis, and I'm nearly always here if you need to get hold of the Colonel for something."

I decided to ask him a few questions while I had the chance. "Do you know why I'm here visiting the Colonel, Allen?"

— "You've got a son you want to enroll here, right?"

"Nope. I'm a private detective."

It took him by surprise, as I had figured it would. He looked like he wanted to bust out with some questions of his own, but the Colonel's famed discipline kept him from doing so.

He was a likable kid and seemed to be plenty smart, and I thought it wouldn't hurt to have somebody else on my side in this place. I propped a hip on the desk and went on, "How come you're in here instead of out learning to be a soldier?"

He shrugged. "Everyone pulls some kind of secretarial or clerical duty at one time or another. The Colonel says that the efficiency of the military depends in large part on the efficiency of its paperwork."

From the look on his face as he quoted the Colonel, I knew that he had a bad case of hero worship. I said, "Don't you have to go to classes?"

"Sure. But they're all honors classes, and we work at our own rate of speed. I don't have to spend much time actually in the classroom."

"You're probably wondering why Colonel Rutledge needs a private detective?"

"No, sir." I could tell he was, though; he was just too well-trained to admit it.

Rutledge didn't want the death threat to be common knowledge, or he would have gone to the cops with it. I said, "I'm looking into something for him. How about helping me?"

"Of course, sir, that is, if I can."

"Do you know a couple of boys named Jeffrey Woolard and Ben Gerard?"

He frowned. "Yes, sir, I know both of them." Disapproval fairly dripped from his words.

"Friends of yours?"

"No, sir. Woolard was in a few of my gym classes, and I saw Gerard every so often in town, but I didn't know either one of them very well. I didn't care to, either."

"Are they your age?"

"A little older, I believe."

"Do you know where I could find them?"

"I heard talk that after the Colonel expelled Woolard, he and Gerard

were going to get an apartment in town together. But I wouldn't really know, sir."

"Why was Woolard expelled?"

Allen hesitated for a moment before saying, "He got one of the local girls in trouble. Her parents were going to sue the Colonel unless he did something about it. He took immediate action, of course."

I changed the subject. "What time did you get here this morning, Allen? Was the Colonel already here?"

"Yes, sir. He always comes in first. He has to unlock the office."

"You don't have a key?"

"No, sir. The Colonel has one, of course, and I believe the janitor does, too, but no one else does, as far as I know."

That was an interesting point. Rutledge hadn't mentioned anything about the lock on the door being forced. Maybe it hadn't been. It was something I would have to ask him about later, but right then I didn't feel like going back into that lion's den.

"Could you tell me where Jefferson Hall is, Allen?"

"Of course. Go across the green to the tower and turn right. It'll be the third building on your left."

"Do you know an instructor named Curtis Tate?"

"I was in his Modern American Literature course," Allen paused, then said, "That was the one that caused all the trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" I was interested to know why Rutledge thought Tate might be holding a grudge against him.

Allen shot a glance at the closed door. "I'd rather not say, sir. The Colonel can tell you all about that."

It was like a door closing. This boy wasn't going to say anything against Rutledge. I had to admire his loyalty, even though Rutledge had struck me as a harsh, inflexible man with the air of a martinet about him. I thanked Allen again for talking to me and headed for Jefferson Hall.

THERE WERE A FEW MORE PEOPLE AROUND NOW, boys from the age of eight to eighteen, all dressed in green uniforms, hurrying around the campus from building to building. It must have been time for a class change. I found Jefferson Hall without any trouble. There was an office just inside the doors. I put my head in and looked around.

There was a counter with another desk behind it and behind the desk was the first female I had seen since I got there. She had her back to me as she typed, but I could see that she had shiny chestnut hair falling to her shoulders. I said, "Excuse me." She turned around and I saw brown eyes and clear skin and told myself that I was much too old

to be falling in love at first sight.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I hope so. I'm looking for Curtis Tate."

She looked at a clock on the wall. "He just finished a class. You might find him in his office. I believe he's got the next period free. Room 406."

"Thanks," I said, and started to duck back out, much as I would have liked to stay a minute longer.

She gave me an excuse to do just that by saying, "Excuse me, would you mind telling me what it's all about? Curtis is one of my teachers."

I must have looked puzzled, because she went on, "I'm Ann Rhodes, the head of the English Department. If Curtis is in trouble again, I want to know about it."

I stepped up to the counter. "I don't know whether he's in trouble or not. Why was he in trouble before?"

Her frown became a little hostile, but it didn't make her any less pretty. "Do you mind if I ask who you are?"

"My name is Markham. I'm working for Colonel Rutledge. I'm a private detective."

She looked as startled as Allen Jarvis had, but she didn't hold in her curiosity like he did. "A private detective? Why does the Colonel need a private detective?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that without the Colonel's permission."

She chuckled rather bitterly. "Never mind," she said. "I just figured it out. He wants you to get the proof that Curtis is really an undercover agent for the Communist conspiracy. All because of that damned book!"

"What book?"

She was so incensed that she answered me without thinking about it. "*Catch-22*. Curtis was teaching it in his Modern American Literature course. The Colonel threw a fit when he found out. He said he wasn't going to have a book being taught in his academy that preached disrespect for the military."

"So he ordered Tate to stop using it?"

"Worse. He cancelled the whole class for the rest of the semester, over the protests of all of us in the department. That just shows you what he thinks we're worth, anyway." Something dawned on her. "Say, you really didn't know anything about it, did you?"

"No, but I think it's pretty interesting. I guess Tate was upset?"

She looked at me speculatively. "Are you sure you're not going to run back to the Colonel with whatever I tell you?"

"I promise you, that's not my job."

She sighed. "Upset is not the word. I thought for a horrible second that Curtis was going to take a punch at him. Of course, he wouldn't have hurt the Colonel, but the Colonel might have hurt *him*."

"Why doesn't Tate just quit if he doesn't like the teaching conditions?"

"The same reason none of the rest of us do. We need the money, and it's hard to find a job in the middle of a semester." She picked up a pencil and began to tap it distractedly on the desk. "You may not know this, Mr. Markham, but the turnover rate is rather high here among the English and Art Departments. I've only been here a year and a half, and I'm already Department head. I'm afraid the Colonel doesn't have too high an opinion of our relative worth. He's heavy for the sciences and math, and history, of course. He likes to say that nobody ever won a war because they could paint a picture or interpret a poem."

I leaned on the counter. "Ms. Rhodes —"

"Doctor. But just call me Ann. We're rather informal on this part of the campus."

"All right, Ann. Would it surprise you to know that even though I'm working for Rutledge right now, he didn't exactly charm me?"

She laughed, and it wasn't bitter this time. In fact, it sounded pretty damn good. "No, it wouldn't surprise me a bit. Really, though, I'd like to know it if Curtis is in some kind of trouble."

"I won't know until I've talked to him. Room 406, you said?"

"That's right. He should be there."

"Thanks. I'll be talking to you later."

She nodded. "I think I'd like that."

THERE WERE NO ELEVATORS IN THE BUILDING, so I walked up four flights of stairs. Tate's office was at the end of a long hall, the last in a series of faculty offices. The door was halfway open, and I could see a man sitting at the desk inside, going over some papers with a red pencil. I rapped my knuckles against the door and said, "Curtis Tate?"

He looked up and said, "That's right. Can I help you?"

He was in his early thirties, I guessed, with dark curly hair and a little moustache. His shoulders had the academic slump that comes from bending over a desk for hours on end. I stepped on into the office and sat down on a straight chair. I said, "My name is Markham. I wonder if you could answer a few questions for me."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you a cop?"

"Sort of. Private. I'm investigating a threat on Colonel Rutledge's life."

Tate smiled. "You're kidding! Well, I didn't do it, Mr. Markham. More power to whoever did."

"That doesn't sound like you would care if the threat was carried out."

He wiggled his eyebrows like Groucho Marx. "You just said the secret word." Then his face got serious. "Oh, hell, that'll just make you more suspicious of me. I'm sure the Colonel thinks I did it, whatever it is. He hates me, you know."

"I got the impression you're not his favorite person. I'll level with you, Tate. I don't like the Colonel much either, but he's hired me to find out who wants him dead, so if it's you, the best thing for you to do is just forget it. If you can't stand the man, quit and get away from him."

The red pencil snapped suddenly in Tate's fingers. "And give him the satisfaction of knowing he ran me off? No, sir. I'm sticking it out until the end of the term."

"Where were you early this morning, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I mind, but I'll tell you. I was at home, at my apartment in town, until seven-thirty. I came directly here then and taught my first class of the day at eight. Is that a good enough alibi?"

"Alibi for what?"

"For whatever happened this morning. I assume it happened this morning, or you wouldn't be asking me where I was then."

He was right. More than that, he was sharp. I had thought for a second that he had slipped up when he asked me about the alibi. But he was right, it was a logical deduction that I was asking his whereabouts at the time of the threat. I asked, "Can you prove where you were?"

"I live alone, Mr. Markham. I guess I can't prove anything before eight o'clock. But my God, Rutledge should know that any death threat he got couldn't have come from me. It just couldn't have!"

"Why should he be so positive?"

"He didn't tell you?" Tate laughed, but it wasn't a very nice sound, not like Ann Rhodes' laugh at all. "He wanted to get rid of me when he found out, but I already had a contract and I would have sued the pants off him if he had tried to fire me."

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

"I was a draft resister, man. I couldn't kill anything, still can't. I went to Canada!"

THE TOWN OF SAN CARLA WAS ONLY FIVE MILES down the road from the academy. It was late afternoon when I pulled into it and found a motel with reasonable rates on the outskirts. I had packed a bag and put it in the car before I left L.A., like I always do on out-of-town jobs.

I had looked in at the English Department office on my way out of Jefferson Hall, but Ann Rhodes hadn't been there. I resolved to take a look in the San Carla phone directory when I got there and see if she was listed. A lot of the instructors at the academy lived there, Curtis Tate among them.

So I shed coat and tie, sprawled out on the motel room bed, and picked up the directory on the night stand beside the phone. There was and A.J. Rhodes listed. I told myself I would give it a try later and see who answered.

There was no listing for a Jeffrey Woolard or a Ben Gerard, and no initials that would fit, either. I found a Frank Gerard, though, so I tried it.

When a woman answered in a tired voice, I asked, "Is Ben Gerard there, please?" I could hear a child crying in the background.

"He doesn't live here anymore," the woman said. I could almost hear her add, "Thank God."

"Do you know where I could reach him?"

"He's got his own place now, but I don't know if you can catch him there."

"Could I have the address?"

"What's it about? I'm his mother; I got a right to know."

I didn't know how kindly she would take it if I told her I was a detective, so I said, "I'm with the Markham Express Company. I've got a package to deliver to him."

"Oh. I thought he was in trouble again." She gave me the address wearily and then hung up in the middle of my thank you.

San Carla wasn't a very big town. The city limit signs had estimated the population at just over 10,000. It drew its support from several sources, including a little light industry, the surrounding farm and ranch land, and the academy. I stopped at the motel office, asked where to find the street where Ben Gerard lived, and then followed the directions I received. It only took me about five minutes to find the place.

It was the kind of apartment house that had gone from first class to third over the years and was still on the downhill slide. I parked on the street half a block away and walked into the lobby. The mailbox for Apartment 2D was marked Gerard/Woolard. It looked like the two boys had done like Allen Jarvis said and become roommates after

Woolard was expelled.

I went up to the second floor and down a hall that was covered with a runner of very threadbare carpet. The lighting was dim, and all in all, it looked like a good place to get mugged.

I knocked on 2D's door and waited for nearly a minute before I heard footsteps on the other side and a voice called through it, "Yeah? Who is it?"

I said, "Open up."

"Who says?"

"I say. I want to talk to you, Gerard."

"Hell, man, go 'way." The voice was slurred, hard to understand. I took a deep breath, but didn't smell any pot.

"Look, friend, I can kick it down."

"You the cops?"

"Just open it."

I heard fumbling with the latch, and then the door opened about an inch. A bleary eye looked out at me. "What you want, man?"

I put my hand against the door and increased the pressure until it swung back, moving the eye with it. The boy staggered back away from the door and gave a mock bow. "Welcome to my humble abode," he managed to get out before he lost his balance and almost fell down.

He was medium height, with long black hair and a drooping moustache. The undershirt he wore left his powerful shoulders and arms bare, but it also emphasized the paunch that hung over his belt. I said, "Are you Ben Gerard?"

"At your service, man. You are a cop, ain't you?"

"Is Jeffrey Woolard here?"

A new voice answered from the door into another room. "Right here, chief."

I turned where I could see him. He was tall and thin, and his red hair was just starting to grow out from the severe cut he had worn while at the academy. There was a bottle of cheap wine in his hand, and he swayed slightly.

I could feel something rising in my throat. I hadn't expected a couple of eighteen-year-old winos. They were both drunk. Well, maybe it would work in my favor. They might be too far gone to be cautious in what they said.

"I want to ask you about Colonel Anthony Rutledge."

That gave both of them the giggles. Woolard tried to give a mock salute and wound up nearly poking himself in the eye. Gerard said, "He's a bastard. What else you want to know?"

"Would you like to see him dead?"

Woolard looked at me goggle-eyed and said, "Oh, wow, a door-to-door hitman!"

Gerard stepped unsteadily in front of me and said, "Damn right I'd like to see him dead. I got good reason!"

"So do I," Woolard added, suddenly vicious. He lifted the nearly empty bottle and caressed it. "I'd like to bust this right in his face. That'd be some discipline for him!"

The mood in the room had turned ugly in a hurry. I knew I might be making a mistake, but I said, "I'm working for him. I'm a private detective."

And then it was a new voice. "You've come to take me home?"

It almost rooted me to the spot. It was high and clear, and it came from the other room. I stepped toward it, but Woolard blocked the doorway. He snarled, "Get out of here, man!"

It was suddenly very important for me to get a look into that other room. I said, "Let me by."

I could hear Gerard moving behind me. He said, "Stupid!" I didn't know if he meant me or Woolard, but there wasn't time to worry about it. There was a rush of feet.

I ducked to the side. Gerard slammed into me but glanced off because of my movement. I kicked out sideways and felt my foot connect with something. Gerard grunted.

Woolard was jumping toward me, swinging the bottle. I moved inside his swing, and the bottle thumped harmlessly on my back. His belly was wide open, and I drove both fists into it as hard as I could. All the breath whooshed out of him. He folded up on the dirty floor, whimpering softly.

I looked back over my shoulder. Gerard was sitting on a ratty sofa, nursing an already swelling knee. He was cursing me bitterly, but I didn't think he would give any more trouble. I stepped through the door, lifting my feet over Woolard.

Late afternoon sunlight was slanting in through a window, making patterns on the floor. In the middle of them sat a girl. Long blond hair streamed down her back. She wore a man's shirt that was too big for her, and as far as I could tell, that was all. She looked at me with wide blue eyes and smiled, then raised a beer bottle to her lips. She held a pair of scissors in her other hand, and little pieces of newspaper littered the floor around her.

She was no more than sixteen years old, if that.

She finished off the beer and said, "Hi. I'm Vicki. Have you come to take me home?"

I glanced back at Woolard and Gerard and suppressed an urge to

go after them again. Turning back to the girl, I said, "Sure, I'll take you home. Where do you live?"

"Why, at the academy, of course. With Grandfather."

I said, "Oh, hell."

HER NAME WAS VICKI RUTLEDGE, and her grandfather was the Colonel, all right, and nobody had told me a damn thing about her. I found her blue jeans in one corner and convinced her to put them on. Then, in a sudden change of mood, she decided that she didn't want to come with me after all. I had to take her arm and nearly drag her out. Woolard, who had recovered somewhat by then, threatened to call the cops and tell them I was kidnapping the girl. I told him to go right ahead.

I got her in the car and even got started toward the academy, when Vicki suddenly clapped a hand to her mouth and cried out, "I'm gonna be sick!"

I stopped the car and let her stick her head out the door for a few minutes. When she sat back up, I asked, "Feeling better now?"

She just looked at me and muttered, "What a dumbass question!"

I tried to introduce myself, but she didn't seem to care. I could tell that she had put away quite a bit of beer, and I was afraid she was still going to feel a lot worse before she felt better.

The ride to the academy was short, for which we were both thankful. She told me how to get to Rutledge's house. It was tucked away behind some hedges in the back corner of the campus. I pulled up in front of it, and almost before I got the engine cut off, she was out of the car and running toward the house. I followed at a slower pace.

Rutledge had evidently heard her come banging in, because he appeared inside the front door just as I got to it. He was wearing slacks and a sweater now, but he still made it look like a uniform. He glared at me and asked, "Was that Vicki who just came running in? What's going on here, Markham?"

I sent the glare right back at him and said, "That's what I'd like to know."

He must not have been used to people not melting under his disapproval, because he looked awkward as he said, "Well, come on in and tell me what's happened."

I FOLLOWED HIM INTO A ROOM that had to be his den. Models of tanks and airplanes sat proudly on shelves on one wall, and another wall was taken up by maps and charts showing the major battles of nearly every war that I could think of.

"You missed the Peloponnesian," I muttered under my breath, then said, "Don't you want to see if Vicki's all right?"

"Is she sick?"

"She's drunk."

"I don't believe it." He said it as if what he didn't believe couldn't possibly exist.

"That doesn't stop her from being drunk. I found her with Jeffrey Woolard and Ben Gerard."

That shook him a little more. He took a deep breath and said, "That's impossible. I . . . I've forbidden her to see either one of them again."

"Why didn't you tell me you had a granddaughter?"

"I don't see that my personal life has anything to do with this situation. I'm sure that one of those three people I told you about put that note in my desk."

"Maybe so," I bit off, "but that doesn't mean that Vicki couldn't be involved." I told him about the way I had found her, and the muscles of his face seemed to shrink as I spoke.

He broke in to say, "Are you trying to tell me that *Vicki* put that note in my desk?"

"I'd say it's a possibility. Woolard and Gerard may have come up with the idea, but she could have done the actual planting of the note. That kid in your office, Allen Jarvis, said that you and the janitor have keys to the office. Does Vicki?"

I never saw anyone that was shell-shocked, but he looked then like he would fit the part. He said, "No, there are only the two keys . . ."

"But Vicki could have yours duplicated sometime. How long has she been involved with those two?"

"She dated Woolard when he was still a student here. I didn't like it." His voice got stronger; some of his natural fierceness was coming back. "I was dead set against her dating any of the boys here. I knew it would only cause trouble."

I didn't see how he expected to keep her from dating when she was surrounded by several hundred adolescent boys, but that didn't have anything to do with the situation at hand. I said, "How about Gerard? Did she go out with him, too?"

"Absolutely not. I wouldn't allow her to associate with trash like that. Gerard is nothing but a common thug. He'll be in prison before too long, mark my words."

I didn't like to think that I was agreeing with him, but I had to admit I shared his low opinion of the two boys. I took a deep breath. "Well, I've told you what I found out and where I found Vicki. You'll just have

to talk to her and see if you can get her to admit that she put the note there."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't feel like driving back down to Los Angeles tonight. I've already got a motel room, so I think I'll stay over. You can call me in the morning and tell me what you find out from Vicki. If she admits to planting the note, my job is over and I go home. If she doesn't, I'll keep poking around if you want. To be honest, though, Colonel, I think I'll be going home in the morning."

He stood there and swallowed. After a moment, he said, "You don't have children. You don't know what it's like, Markham. My . . . my son and I were never close. I thought perhaps . . . When he and my daughter-in-law were killed in an auto accident, I thought I could take Vicki and raise her the way I should have raised my son. With a firm hand. With respect for the things that are important. I . . . I suppose I've failed."

I wouldn't have thought I would be able to muster any sympathy for him, no matter how maudlin he got, but I found myself feeling sorry that I had been the one to tell him about Vicki. I lost that feeling, though, when he suddenly said, "War is different. It's not concerned with the piddling details of life." He straightened and stalked over to the maps on the wall. Jabbing a blunt finger at Europe, he said, "There's where the glory is! That's where life really is, in the midst of death. Only in war does man reach his full potential." His lips drew back in a grimace. "You see, it's a game, but winning or losing doesn't matter. It's all in the playing. You do your best, and you live or you die, but either way you have the glory of the game!"

I slipped out of the room while he was still staring raptly at the map. I felt sorry for Vicki and for Curtis Tate and even a little bit for Woolard and Gerard. But after that speech, I didn't feel sorry for Colonel Anthony Rutledge, not anymore.

THE SUN WAS JUST SETTING AS I GOT BACK to the motel. There was a rumbling in my stomach to remind me that I hadn't eaten since grabbing a hamburger on the drive up from L.A. I picked up the phone and dialed a number I had committed to memory earlier. When a woman answered, I said, "Ann? This is Markham. We met earlier today."

"Of course," Ann said softly. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. I think my job for the Colonel is over and done with."

"Did you receive an honorable discharge?"

"I'm . . . not sure. I didn't cause any more trouble for Curtis Tate,

you'll be happy to hear."

"I certainly am. Curtis is a good teacher, if he's left alone to teach."

No truly perfect way has yet been invented to find out subtly if a woman is involved with someone else, so I just stuck my neck out and said, "I'm going to be staying over in town tonight. Would you like to have dinner with me?"

She only hesitated for a second. "I think I'd like that. Can you give me about an hour?"

"Sure."

The hour that Ann had requested gave me plenty of time to shower and shave. I felt quite a bit better by the time I drove up in front of the little house where she lived. She met me at the door wearing dark brown pants and a tan jacket. We both smiled and said hello, and then she asked, "Can you tell me about your job for the Colonel now?"

"Maybe later. I'd just as soon not discuss it right now."

"All right." We went back down the walk to my car. "Where are we going?"

"Well, I don't know the town. How about if I put myself in your hands?"

"Okay. Do you like steak?"

"Sure."

I opened her door for her, which she didn't object to, and when I was behind the wheel and had the car going again, she said, "There's a good steak house in town, and that's about it unless you want tacos or hamburgers."

"I get enough of those in L.A."

"You must eat on the run a lot."

"That seems to be part of the job."

She looked over at me intently for a second. "What's it like to be a private detective? Or do people ask you that all the time?"

"Nobody asks me that. It's all right, I suppose. I'll never get rich, but then I'll never get pestered to endow a hospital wing or a library."

"I would imagine that it's a high-conflict job."

"Like teaching."

She nodded. "Yeah. Like teaching."

THE STEAKS WERE FINE, AND THE HOUSE WINE was surprisingly good. In the process of enjoying the meal, I found out that she was twenty-nine, that she had her doctorate from USC, and that her dissertation had been on popular culture and its influence on American literature. I also found out that she liked animals, Italian food, and black-and-white movies. I had found perfection, even if it was with the

knowledge that nothing perfect can last for long. I knew there had to be something about her that I would absolutely hate, and that I would discover it if I spent enough time with her. But then she was bound to hate something about me, too, so why not enjoy what we had while we had it?

The only trouble was, we got to talking about the reason Rutledge had hired me, and I wound up telling her what had happened that afternoon.

She shook her head and said, "How terrible. I knew that Vicki was having some trouble, but I never thought it had gone that far."

"Where does she go to school? Here in town?"

"No, she's tutored by the faculty at the academy. I've taught her myself. She's a nice girl, but she's living with a man who seems to be pathologically impossible to please."

She sipped her wine and went on, "Curtis Tate isn't the first one to have curriculum trouble with him, you know. He wants to personally supervise everything that's taught at the academy. I guess that's his right, but it makes it hard for teachers to teach. His temper makes it even harder."

"I imagine he can be pretty rough on people."

Her face got tight. "He's had a few words for me in the past. But nothing to compare with what he did to poor Curtis."

"You mind telling me about it?"

"When he found out that Curtis was using *Catch-22*, the Colonel called a meeting of the entire faculty, and then in front of all of us, he gave Curtis hell. Pure hell. Lambasted him for using what he called a perverted, Communist, anti-American piece of trash. He had a copy of the book, and he lit it with his lighter right there and burned it, actually *burned* it. Then he started in on Curtis personally, insulting his parentage and his sexual preference mainly, and he didn't have any basis for any of it. All because he didn't agree with the way the book treated the military."

All I could do was shake my head. "I don't see how Tate stood it."

"I don't, either. It made me so mad that I was almost ready to stand up and tell him off myself. I didn't, but it pretty well made up my mind for me, though. I'm leaving at the end of the semester. There's bound to be a better job somewhere else."

"That's right," I agreed. "Like in the Los Angeles area."

She smiled.

I went on, "I think either Woolard or Gerard or both of them came up with the idea of the death threat. Does that sound likely to you?"

"Yes. Jeff Woolard has reason enough to hate the Colonel, that's for sure."

"You mean because he expelled him?"

"I mean because the Colonel beat him up at the time."

"What?"

She nodded. The smile was gone now, and I almost wished I hadn't brought the whole thing up again.

"When the Colonel found out about the girl that Jeff got pregnant, he called him into the office and told him that he was expelled, no appeal. It was that or have the academy sued, I guess. Still, I think the Colonel was more upset because the idea of it goes against his moral code."

"It would most people's," I put in.

"That's fine, but then the Colonel started to slap him around. I — I was in the outer office when it happened, waiting to see the Colonel about something. I don't even remember what it was now. We could hear what was going on in the inner office. You saw Jeff Woolard. There's no way he could stand up to the Colonel."

"How bad was he hurt?"

"Jeff was pretty badly bruised and stunned when he came out, but I don't suppose he was really injured. It just seemed so unjust to me."

"I don't get it . . . Why do the parents of the students put up with stuff like that?"

She gave that bitter chuckle again. "Let me explain something to you. A lot of our students are problem kids. They're troublemakers at home. Their parents have to be rich to send them to us, and they don't want to be bothered with problems. They send the kids to us to get them out of their hair and to teach them some discipline. The Colonel's idea of discipline runs to brutality, but the parents don't want to hear about that. They've washed their hands of the whole business. So who gives a damn?"

"You do," I said. "And so do I."

We were both quiet for a moment.

Something was nagging away at me, urging me to ask more questions.

So I asked, "How about Ben Gerard? Why does he hate the Colonel?"

"Ben hates everybody in a position of authority. He's the Colonel's antithesis in that respect. But it's not just the Colonel and the academy he hates; he's had a lot of trouble with the San Carla police. I think he's been in reform school more years of his life than he's been out."

"Prison's next on that list, usually."

Ann nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised. I just hope he doesn't kill anyone before he gets there."

The whole conversation had cast a pall on the evening, and I wished I had been able to suppress the urge to ask the questions. My mind didn't feel like things were completely straightened out, though, and that's a feeling I don't like, either.

Ann took a deep breath and looked at me speculatively over the rim of her glass. She said, "Did you have any plans for the rest of the evening?"

"No, nothing for sure," I answered honestly.

"Then how about coming back to my house for awhile? I like talking to you."

"That's a good idea."

I thought about what might happen when we got back to Ann's house. Whatever happened would be all right with me. I really enjoyed talking with her, and I would enjoy . . . not talking.

The only trouble was, we didn't get there.

I HAD HAD TO PARK AT THE FAR END of the restaurant's lot, and it wasn't very well-lighted. We were walking back to the Ford. I had slipped my hand into Ann's and she didn't seem to mind, and the cool night air felt good on my face. We paused beside the Ford, and I slipped my other hand in my pocket to find my keys.

That's when the darkness reared up and hit me.

I felt Ann jerked away from me as something slammed into my head. The force of the blow sent a piledriver of pain into my brain and drove me to my knees. I heard Ann scream, but it was muffled suddenly.

I tried to get up, but somebody jumped on my back and forced me down again. A foot drove into my stomach from the front. I felt that good dinner start to come back up.

The person on my back had looped an arm around my neck and was squeezing as hard as he could. I drove an elbow back into him, but that didn't loosen the grip. Somebody else cursed and punched me in the face. Even in my pain, I recognized Jeff Woolard's voice. I knew it was probably Gerard on my back.

I could hear other voices whispering urgently and the sound of several pairs of feet scuffling around. They had brought help with them this time.

I managed to get my feet under me and reared over backwards. I landed hard on whoever was holding me, and that succeeded where my elbow had failed. The arms and legs wrapped around me went slack for

a second, and I tore out of their grip. I came up, right into another punch from Woolard.

It staggered me, but at least I was on my feet again. My stomach was in an upheaval, and my head felt like it was in a wine press, but my vision cleared long enough for me to see two boys holding Ann roughly against my car while Woolard and Gerard circled around me.

If I'd had my gun, I think I might have blown them all away. As it was, a white-hot rage surged through me and sent me flying right into the middle of them, rather than waiting for them to jump me.

I bounced a right off Woolard's face and then plowed into Gerard, hooking short punches to his belly. He let out a yelp and tried to jump away from me. I let him get far enough away so that I could hit him twice in the jaw. He went down in a heap.

Woolard said, "Goddamn you!" and I heard a click. I turned. He was holding a switchblade. With his short hair, he looked like something out of a Fifties movie about juvenile delinquency. He jumped toward me and slashed.

I ducked back. Woolard snarled, "You're not such a big man now, are you? You bastards think you can run over anybody you want. I wish I'd had this knife when the toy soldier was working me over!"

He was talking about the Colonel. I caught my breath and said, "Put it up, Woolard. Somebody's going to get hurt bad."

He sneered. "Damn straight. You are, sucker. I'm going to cut you up good, then have a good time with Teacher there."

Ann's eyes were wide with terror. One of the boys holding her had a hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming. I knew this was one fight I'd better win.

Suddenly, Gerard came up from the ground, where he had been lying in a whimpering ball, and threw a body block into my legs. I went down hard. I could see Woolard leaping at me as I fell, the knife upraised.

Then there was a flicker of movement behind him, and the knife went spinning out of his hand. Someone had crashed into him and spun him around. I couldn't see who it was, but Woolard cried out in pain and doubled over, clutching his stomach.

Gerard and I came up at the same time, but I landed the first punch. It drove the boy back into Ann and her two captors. They let go of her. I stepped in and slammed my fists into the face of one of them. The other one was being taken care of by whoever it was that had downed Woolard.

The one I was dealing with slumped against the car and then slid down the side of it, holding his hands over his face and begging me to

stop. I stepped back. Ann was still leaning on the car, horror-stricken, trying to catch her breath. Woolard, Gerard, and the third boy were stretched out on the asphalt in various stages of semi-consciousness, and standing over them was Allen Jarvis, a wide grin on his young face. He looked at me and said, "I guess we won this one, didn't we, Mr. Markham?"

I NODDED CAREFULLY, SO MY HEAD WOULDN'T FALL OFF.
"Yeah," I managed to say. "Thanks, Allen."

He looked positively buoyant. "Boy, I'm glad I was passing by. I saw these guys ganging up on somebody and decided to pitch in, but I didn't know it was you and Dr. Rhodes they were after. Do you know you're bleeding?"

I had felt something trickling down the side of my face, and when I put my fingers up there, they came away red and sticky. There was a piece of board lying on the ground nearby, and I supposed that was what they had hit me with.

"I'd better let a doctor look at this," I said. "Can you see that Dr. Rhodes gets home all right, Allen?"

"Sure, I'd be glad to. Can you get to the hospital by yourself okay, though?"

"Just tell me where it is."

Luckily, the hospital was only three blocks away, so I could walk and wouldn't have to drive. I handed my car keys to Allen, then put my arms around Ann. She was still shaking.

She looked up at me and said, "Oh God, you're hurt."

"A little cut. It'll be all right. Allen is going to take you home."

"You . . . you need to go to the hospital."

"That's where I'm going. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

She took a deep shuddery breath. "You'd damn well better. Oh . . . I was so scared . . ."

I stroked the soft chestnut hair. "It's all right now. It's all okay."

I held her for a moment longer silently, then turned her over to Allen. After Ann was in the car, he said, "Shouldn't we call the police? We can't leave these guys just laying here."

"I'll take care of it when I get to the hospital. Could you bring my car back there?"

"Right. I'll see you in just a little bit, Mr. Markham."

We left in opposite directions. It took me only a few minutes to walk to the hospital. I felt surprisingly steady on my feet now. I knew I'd have a hell of a headache in the morning, though.

Finding the emergency room was no trouble. A middle-aged doctor

inside took six neat stitches in a line that slanted from my forehead down into my right eyebrow while a nurse called the cops for me and told them what had happened. The doctor bandaged the sewn-up cut, told me I'd have a slight scar there, and warned me of the dangers of possible concussion. I told him I'd heard it all before.

Allen came in while I was getting tended to. When the doctor had finished, I walked back out into the little lobby and saw him sitting there. I asked, "Is Ann all right?"

"Yes, sir. I took her right back to her house. She said to tell you that she would be fine, for you not to worry."

I nodded. "Thank you, Allen. For jumping into the fight when you did, and for taking care of Ann."

"You like her, don't you?"

I had to smile. "That obvious, huh?"

He smiled back and nodded. "Dr. Rhodes is a nice lady. And a good teacher."

"Have you got a car, Allen?"

"No, sir, I came into town on the bus."

"What are you doing in town at this time of night, anyway?"

He grinned again, rather sheepishly. "We have free time from seven to nine. I needed some stamps. The Colonel tries to discourage us from coming into town, but I didn't think it would hurt. I guess I'll be late getting in."

"I'll take you back to the academy, then."

"That won't be necessary, sir. I can catch the bus again."

"Ride back out to the motel with me, anyway," I said. "You can get the bus there."

He considered for a second, then said, "All right. Sure."

When I had the car started and pointed back toward the motel, I said, "You really looked good back there. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"My father taught me, sir, when I was younger. He was a boxer; he even fought some in the Army before he was killed."

I looked over at him. He was staring straight ahead, a slight smile still on his lips. I said, "I'm sorry if I brought up something I shouldn't have."

"No, that's all right. Talking about my father doesn't upset me. He was killed in Vietnam in 1971. I'm really very proud of him."

"I'm sure you are," I said softly.

"Anyway, I've always liked to box, so I guess I come by it honestly. That was a good fight tonight."

"You sound like you enjoyed it."

He shrugged. "Conflict brings out the best in a man."

"Woolard was trying to kill me, you know."

"I know. That just made the stakes higher. The game is more fun that way."

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. I had heard that before, in slightly different form, from Colonel Rutledge. He had Allen under his spell, I could see that now. No wonder that boy liked working in the Colonel's office.

I pulled into the motel parking lot and parked in front of my cabin. We got out of the car, and Allen said, "Thanks for bringing me this far. I'll go catch that bus on the highway now."

I had just started to thank him again for all that he had done, when a voice came floating out of the darkness and said, "Help me, please . . . Oh God, help me . . ."

We spun around and saw Vicki Rutledge coming out of the shadows next to my cabin. She took two steps toward us and then slid to the gravel in a dead faint.

TEN MINUTES LATER, WE HAD HER SITTING UP on the bed in the motel room, sipping on a glass of ice water that Allen had rounded up. Her right eye was blackened, and there was a good-sized bruise on the left side of her jaw. I wondered if that was what the Colonel meant by a firm hand.

"He scared me so bad," she said. "He kept telling me to admit my guilt, and then he would hit me. Nothing I told him would satisfy him. It was like whatever I admitted wasn't bad enough. He wanted more."

Allen's face was set in tight lines. He listened to what she was saying about the man he so admired, and it was obviously hard on him.

"He left me alone for a little while," Vicki went on. "He said he was going to let me contemplate my guilt and lack of discipline. I opened my window and got the hell out of there instead."

Allen had been trying not to say anything, but he couldn't keep quiet any longer. He burst out with, "He was just trying to help you, to teach you how to get some control of your life."

She just gave him a cold glare and said, "That's bullshit, and you know it, Allen."

He looked stunned. Violence he accepted calmly, but I guess he wasn't used to hearing young girls talk like that.

"I didn't know where to go," Vicki said. "Then I remembered you, Markham. Grandfather had said you were staying here. I . . . I thought maybe you could help me, even if you were working for him. If you

could just . . . just loan me some money, so I can get away from here —”

Somebody knocked on the door.

Vicki flinched, drawing back in terror. “It’s him!” she breathed. “Don’t let him take me back out there!”

I stepped to the curtain and flicked it back just enough to see a blue-uniformed cop standing there. I said quietly, “It’s the police. They’re probably here about the fight earlier. Allen, you and Vicki go in the bathroom and stay there. Keep quiet. They don’t have to know you’re here.”

Allen began, “Shouldn’t we —”

“No. Do as I tell you.”

I guess they were both used to taking orders. They went into the bathroom and shut the door behind them. I opened the cabin door and the cop asked, “Is your name Markham, sir?”

“That’s right.”

“You called earlier about some boys attacking you? We’ve got them in custody, and we need your statement.”

“Right. Can you get it here? I’m not feeling so hot. You can check with the doctor in the emergency room at the hospital. He can tell you that I may even have concussion.”

The cop shook his head and took out his notebook. “No problem. Just tell me what happened. I’ll get it typed up later and you can come over to the station in the morning and sign it.”

That was fine with me, especially with Vicki and Allen hiding in the bathroom. I told him what had happened, leaving out the motivation for it, since I wasn’t sure the Colonel wanted the police to know about the death threat. He was still my client, after all. The only pure lie I told was when I said that a boy from the academy had come along and helped us and that he had gone on his way after the fight was over. The cop said that talking to Ann could wait until the next day, which was all right, too, because it would give me a chance to talk to her and let her know exactly what I had told the cops.

The officer wasn’t suspicious at all. To him, this was just a routine attack on a citizen by a gang of punks. He did ask what I was doing in San Carla, and I told him I was a private detective who was on my way home after a job, which was also true in a way.

When he left, I opened the bathroom door and found the two of them glaring at each other, Vicki sitting on the toilet seat and Allen standing as far away as he could, arms folded. No chance for a case of puppy love here, I thought.

“All right,” I said. “I guess you heard what I told him. If he talks to

you later, Allen, you can just tell him that you pitched in because the odds were uneven and that after the fight you went back to the academy."

"What about me?" Vicki asked.

That one was harder. I said after a moment, "I'll get you a room here and you can stay the night. You'll have to go back to your grandfather in the morning, though. You've got to have it out with him sometime, and it might as well be now."

She didn't like it, but at least I was offering her a haven for the night. I told her to stay where she was while I walked down to the office and got her a room.

Allen went with me. He was silent for the first few feet, then said, "He's not really that bad, you know. She's exaggerating. The Colonel is a great man. He once wrote, *The only thing greater than living for an ideal is dying for an ideal.*"

"Noble sentiment."

"*Force of arms is the surest and purest form of persuasion.*" I could tell he was still quoting.

"*War is the ultimate, the most fulfilling thing that man can experience.*"

"What about love?"

He stopped. "I . . . What . . . I don't know, Mr. Markham. I just don't know."

I went on to the office and he went on to the road to catch the bus. I had to shake my head as I watched him jog off into the darkness. He seemed like a damn fine kid, until he started quoting the Colonel's bloodthirsty maxims. I shuddered to think about what kind of graduates the Rutledge Military Academy was turning out.

VICKI WAS SITTING ON THE BED. She had turned the television on and was watching Robert Mitchum lead a troop of infantry against the Germans. When I came in, she got up, turned the set off, and said, "I hate those crappy war movies."

"Don't watch them, then. Here's the key. The cabin is two doors down."

She shifted from foot to foot, then said, "Hey . . . Thanks, Markham. I know you could have kicked me out on my butt."

"Yeah, I could have. But it just so happens that I don't care much for your grandfather, either." I took a deep breath and came to a decision. "I'll go out there with you in the morning. You can talk to him then, try to work something out."

"Yeah, sure. Work something out." She took a step toward the

door, then turned back. "Listen, though. I want you to know that I didn't do it. What he accused me of, I mean. I didn't put any death threat in his office. He never did believe me, though."

"What about the way I found you this afternoon? It was a reasonable conclusion to come to."

"Hell, I was drunk! I was cutting those little fillers out of the paper, you know, those things that say Lake So-and-so is the deepest lake in the Western Hemisphere. I cut 'em out and save 'em. You should see the bulletin board in my room."

I was a little surprised to find that I believed her. I had been convinced earlier that she had delivered the threat, even if Woolard and/or Gerard had come up with it. She was acting like she had never heard of it until after I had taken her back to the academy, and she was convincing me. That meant that I hadn't done my job after all.

I told Vicki good night and watched from the door of my cabin until she had entered the one I had rented for her. Of course, there was nothing to stop her from taking off again before morning, but somehow, I didn't think she would.

I thought about calling Ann, but a glance at my watch told me it was after midnight, and I didn't want to disturb her this late. My head was hurting quite a bit. I wound up stretching out on the bed fully dressed, I told myself it was just for a few minutes.

I should have known better. I was sound asleep before I knew it.

THE Jangling of the telephone six inches from my ear woke me up with a shock. My hand shot out and grabbed it reflexively, but it was a second before I could get my head clear enough to put the receiver to my ear and say, "Yeah?" Sunlight was coming in around the curtains.

"Markham, this is Colonel Rutledge." The voice was crisp. "Come out to the academy immediately."

I rubbed my eyes. "I'm not an enlisted man, Colonel. What's going on?"

"I . . . I need your help." He sounded like it hurt him to admit it. "A situation has come up that I don't know how to handle."

It surprised me to hear him say that. I said, "Don't worry about Vicki. She's all right, and I'll be bringing her out there in a little while."

"Oh, she's with you?" He didn't sound too concerned about it. "When I discovered she was gone, I knew she would turn up somewhere. No, this is something else entirely, Markham."

His attitude about Vicki wasn't making me feel too friendly toward

him. I growled, "What?"

"There's been a killing."

I sat up straight, making my head throb. "Who?" I snapped.

"One of our janitors, a man named William Cribb. I just found the body."

"Have you called the police?"

"No. I'd rather have your opinion of the situation first."

"Where are you?"

"In my office. That's where the body is."

"Stay there. Don't let anyone in but me. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Affirmative."

I was wrong. I got there in eight minutes. The same guy was guarding the gate. Evidently the Colonel had called the gatehouse and told him to expect me, because he waved me right on through. I saw a few students hurrying here and there, late for class probably, unaware of what had happened.

I parked in front of the administration building and hurried inside. I took the stairs two at a time.

The door to the outer office was open, and there was no sign of Allen Jarvis. I was glad he hadn't shown up for duty yet.

Stepping to the door of the inner office, I called out, "It's me, Colonel. Open the door."

I heard him snap the latch off and then he swung the door open. It would only go part of the way before some obstruction stopped it. I thought I knew what the obstruction was.

I was right. The man was elderly, his lined face twisted in a death grimace. He was lying on his side just inside the door, clutching his stomach. There was quite a puddle of dried blood on the floor. I looked at Colonel Rutledge over the body and said, "What the hell happened?"

"This is the way I found him. Both doors were unlocked. You can see what kind of condition the office is in. I haven't touched anything."

I LOOKED AROUND. THE GLASS ON THE GUN and trophy cabinet had been shattered, and the contents had been scattered around on the floor. The little book that had been inside had been ripped open, many of the pages torn out and crumpled. Inside the cabinet, someone had scratched a message into the wood of the back.

Now is the time! Death will take her victim!

"I don't understand it," Rutledge said. "Why would anyone want to kill Cribb?"

"Don't be stupid," I said harshly. "Cribb wasn't meant to die. He came in either last night or this morning to do some cleaning and caught whoever was doing this."

The Army .45 was on the floor in front of the bookcase. I stooped to look at it and asked, "Surely you don't keep this loaded?"

"Of course I do. What good is an unloaded gun?"

I sighed. "That's probably what the killer used, judging by the amount of damage the slug did. He panicked when Cribb came in and grabbed whatever was close to hand."

The Colonel's hands slowly clenched into fists. He said slowly, "Woolard or Gerard?"

I shook my head. "Not likely. They're probably still in jail, have been since last night. They tried to do a dance on my head."

"Then it must have been Curtis Tate. Let's go, Markham. I want to get my hands on that goddamn fairy."

He started past me. I put a hand on his chest and stopped him. He looked surprised.

"Hold on, Rutledge. We're not going anywhere. We're going to call the cops. Understood? And because a man objects to a war and teaches English doesn't make him a fairy. Understood?"

I was good and mad, tired of this man and the mess he had dragged me into. Now that a man had been killed, even a man I hadn't known, I was in no mood to put up with anything from the Colonel.

He looked like he was thinking about throwing a punch at me, then decided against it. He said grudgingly, "Well . . . I suppose we should turn this over to the proper authorities. That's the only way society can function, you know, by adhering to the established rules."

"Save it. And make that call."

He did as I told him. I could hear the excited voice of a cop on the other end of the line promising to get there right away. I just stood there and looked down grimly at the body on the floor.

THE COLONEL HUNG UP AND STARTED PICKING UP some of the pages that had been torn out of the book. I started to tell him not to bother anything, but I didn't see what harm it could do. It might keep him quiet, too.

It didn't. He said, "I've been keeping this journal ever since I joined the Army in 1938. I . . . I hoped to perhaps have a book of my memoirs published someday. I think I've got some important things to say, especially in today's permissive society."

I didn't feel like arguing with him.

"All my personal thoughts went into that book," he went on. "I

always kept it locked up, so that no one could read them until I was ready. I don't know why Tate had to tear it up. I guess he'd like to tear down everything I stand for."

He was feeling sorry for himself because his journal got torn up, when there was a dead man lying on the floor. My head was hurting worse than ever. I reached down and grabbed a handful of the torn sheets, thrusting them at him and growling, "Here! Here's your damn thoughts!"

He reached for them and I suddenly jerked them back. He frowned and started to say, "Don't play games with me, Mark —"

"Shut up." Familiar words were staring up at me from the paper. I could feel myself going numb all over.

Force of arms is the surest and purest form of persuasion.

I scanned the words on another sheet.

War is the ultimate, the most fulfilling thing that man can experience.

I remembered very vividly where I had heard those words before. I didn't bother looking for the third quote. I knew it had to be there somewhere.

"You say you kept this book locked up in the case all the time?"

"Except when I was writing in it. And I have the only key."

"Then only two people knew what was in it. You, and the killer." I kept rubbing my eyes and temples, but the ache wouldn't go away. "Where can I find Allen Jarvis?"

"Jarvis? Why do you want to know? He should be here any second now. He's usually on duty by this time."

I looked up, saw the puzzlement on the Colonel's face, and looked past him. I saw the bell tower through the window, and the morning light reflected off of something that wasn't the dull brass bell.

Rutledge was four feet away from me. I covered the distance in a split-second, slammed into him, and drove him to the floor. The window shattered above us, showering us with shards of glass. Rutledge gasped, "Dammit! What — What . . . ?"

"We're under attack, Colonel," I spat out. "Stay down."

He started to raise up. "I don't understand —"

I jerked him back down as another bullet smacked through the air above us and knocked a hole in the wall. "Allen Jarvis is in the bell tower," I grated, "and he's shooting at us. At you, rather. Is he a good shot?"

Rutledge looked confused. "Jarvis? He's a very good shot . . . He's won several of our marksmanship competitions. Fine boy. Took to the art of war wonderfully. Why would he shoot at me?"

Rutledge was out of it.

There was no time to worry about that, though. Allen had us pinned to the floor. I scooped up the .45 that had probably killed the janitor and checked the clip. There were five shots left. I told Rutledge to stay down and then raised the gun enough to snap a shot over the sill of the window in the general direction of the tower.

Then I dived for the door, hearing as I did so the whine of a slug close by my ear. I made it into the outer office untouched, and ran down the stairs.

People were sticking their heads out of doors on the first floor, curious about the shots. I yelled, "Take cover and stay down!" They all ducked back.

I hoped the Colonel would stay down as I had told him, and that no one else stuck their head out where they shouldn't. I knew now that Allen had to be unbalanced. I didn't know if he would shoot anybody but Rutledge, but there was a chance of it. He had certainly shot Cribb the night before.

And then had come into San Carla and saved my life during the fight.

He had been a decent, respectable kid while he was with me, wanting only to be helpful. The cops would be here any minute, and they wouldn't know anything about whatever pressures had sent him over the edge. They would see only a sniper in a tower, and they would do whatever they had to to stop him, even if it meant killing him.

And, God help me, I knew they would have no other choice.

But maybe I could do something. Allen had liked me. Maybe I could talk to him, convince him to stop shooting and come down. . . .

That's what I was thinking as I skidded out of the administration building and onto the green. Then a bullet plowed up a chunk of turf a foot away.

I JUMPED TO ONE SIDE, MY MOMENTUM STILL CARRYING ME forward. I realized that it was a long way to any kind of cover. If I turned to go back, I might be an even better target. So I ran on, zig-zagging from side to side, just like in the war movies when the G.I.'s rush the enemy machine gun.

A few more bullets hit fairly close to me, then the fire moved back to the administration building. I was getting close to the base of the tower now, and I guess the angle was too severe from the top.

There was a door in the base of the tower. It was unlocked, and once I was inside, I could see the metal rungs of a ladder leading up one wall of the shaft. That was the only way up. The top was dark, so I supposed

that Allen had the door leading out of the shaft closed. I hoped it stayed that way. I would be an easy target if he opened it while I was climbing.

The higher I got, the darker it got. By the time I neared the top, I was feeling my way from rung to rung carefully. The tower was at least a hundred feet high, and I knew a misstep would be as fatal as a bullet.

I reached the last rung. A trapdoor was just above my head, its edges outlined by light filtering down around it. I put a hand on it, holding on tightly to the ladder with the other one, and tested it. It moved slightly. Allen must have left it unlocked, if it even had a lock.

He was still firing. I could hear the crack of the rifle right above me. I wondered how much ammunition he had. He was an intelligent young man. He would have brought along plenty.

There was nothing left to do. I set myself and threw the trapdoor open. My feet kicked off against the ladder and I pulled with my other arm as hard as I could. I almost popped out of the shaft and onto the little six-by-eight platform under the bell.

I rolled when I landed, coming hard against the low brick coping over which Allen had been firing. He was on the other side of the platform, spinning around and bringing the rifle to bear on me. I threw the .45 up and yelled, "Wait!"

He stopped, finger white on the trigger. Mine was the same way. We were frozen like that for a second, then he took a deep breath and said, "Get out of here, Mr. Markham. I don't want to kill you."

"I don't want you to kill anybody," I said. "Come on, Allen, put the gun down."

"Can't. I have to punish him."

I knew he meant the Colonel. I asked, "Why, Allen? Why do you have to punish him?"

"He's not good enough!" Allen snapped. "He's supposed to be perfect!"

"Nobody's perfect," I said softly. I could hear the screech of police sirens and knew that time was short.

"Well, the Colonel was supposed to be," Allen said. "He was the first man I could admire since my father died. You don't know how I looked up to him when I first came to this place. He was firm and self-reliant and everything a man should be. Then I got the duty in his office and found out what he's really like."

Allen breathed deeply, keeping the muzzle of the rifle lined up on me. It wasn't wavering a bit, but neither was the .45.

"I heard him beating up Jeff Woolard," he went on in a strained voice. "I saw how he treated his own granddaughter. I tried to make excuses for him, even when I knew he was wrong. Like when he made

so much trouble for Mr. Tate. I *knew* Mr. Tate was a good teacher, but I thought that the Colonel wouldn't do anything that wasn't right, even if it seemed wrong to me. I . . . I still loved him. I wanted him to be the great man I had thought he was."

His voice had dropped almost to a whisper. He went on, "I didn't mean to hurt anybody or get anybody in trouble. It — it was almost like somebody else besides me fixed up that message and left it in his desk. He . . . he didn't know that I had taken his key one day while he was working and had it duplicated in town while I was running errands for him. I liked to go in his office while he wasn't there, you see, and look at his guns and his trophies and his medals. I wanted to take them out and touch them, but I never got a chance . . ."

"Until last night."

The rifle barrel shook just a little bit. I couldn't turn my head to look, but it sounded like the police cars had entered the grounds of the campus.

"I was there . . . at the house," Allen choked out. "I was outside when you brought Vicki back yesterday afternoon. I saw through the window when he was hitting her. I knew then that he really did deserve to die. I went to the office later, to destroy those things that he loved, to tear down that shrine to himself that he had put up. I . . . I didn't think about the janitor coming in . . . Afterwards, I had to get away from there. I tried to tell myself that it didn't happen, that none of it really happened . . ."

"Let's go back down, Allen," I said. "Please. It's not worth dying over. *He's* not worth dying over."

He shook his head frenziedly. Despite the coolness of the morning, there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead. Mine, too.

"No! It is worth dying for! Don't you understand, I had an ideal!"

There were a lot of yelling voices below. One of them suddenly boomed out, amplified by a bullhorn, "All right, come on down, and you won't be hurt!"

Allen just stared at me over the barrel of the rifle. All I could do was stare back.

"Come down, son!" The bullhorn again. "If you don't, we'll have to start shooting!"

I REALIZED THE POLICE COULDN'T SEE ME from where they were, since I was lying on my side under the wall. They probably thought Allen was alone up here. If he didn't surrender soon, they would have no choice but to open up on the top of the tower.

The amplified voice came floating up again. "I can only give you

another minute. Please, son —”

Allen's head jerked around. “I'm not your son!” he screamed. “I'm not anybody's son!” He turned the rifle from me to begin shooting down at the police.

I didn't think about what I was doing. I just came up off the platform as rifles began to crack down below and reached out. My fingers clamped down on the rifle barrel and jerked. Allen wouldn't let go. Both of us fell back to the platform while bullets cut the air above us.

I had dropped my own gun, when I grabbed for Allen, and now he had the muzzle of the rifle jammed into my stomach. His eyes were wide and staring and more than half insane, and I knew suddenly that all I had done was get myself killed right along with him.

Then we heard it, carrying plainly over the green during a lull in the firing from below. It was a terrified, almost incoherent voice; shrieking and pleading, “Don't let him kill me! Shoot him! Please — Don't let him kill me!”

It was the Colonel.

Allen's eyes got calm. He pulled the rifle out of my stomach and his lips curved just slightly in a ghastly semblance of a smile. “You're right, Mr. Markham,” he said. “He may have been a good man once, but he's not worth dying over now. Let's get out of here before somebody else gets hurt.”

I started breathing again. Then I started yelling for everybody to hold their fire.

I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE GOTTEN IN MY CAR and left right away, so as not to see the aftermath. But that's not the way it happened.

A white and shaking Colonel Rutledge was being led by a cop out of the administration building as several others swarmed around Allen and me. They snapped cuffs on him roughly. He looked at the Colonel and then at me and shook his head. He said, “It's not a game, is it?”

“I wish it was,” I said. “Then we could fold it up and go home.”

They hustled him away then, and he disappeared into the back seat of a police car that left the campus with its siren screaming.

I went into the building with a police lieutenant and told him what had happened, while the others were quieting things down on the campus and removing the janitor's body. He was the only fatality, which was small consolation.

When the cops were finally satisfied they had the whole story, they let me go, warning me to stay in the vicinity, of course. I promised dutifully to do so.

And then I was out in the morning air again, and the place was surprisingly peaceful. A few cops standing around and some divots where Allen had shot up the green were the only evidence that something bad had happened here.

Ann came running up as I got to my car. She put a hand on my arm and asked intensely, "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "I've been better, but I'm not damaged. How about you?"

"I was in class when it all started. I thought about calling in sick this morning, after what happened last night, but I decided not to. It was awful when the shooting started. None of us knew what was going on. I'm still not sure what really happened."

I looked into her eyes and saw the concern there, and maybe the beginnings of something else, too. I said, "How would you like to get out of here for a while? Maybe take a drive. I'll tell you what I know about it, if you want to hear."

"It's a sad story, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"I guess that's part of it. Let's go."

She was right. There's always a sad part. But that's not all of it, not hardly.

She sat close to me as we left the academy. I had thought the night before that in her I had found perfection. I still hadn't discovered her flaws and faults, and maybe she hadn't seen mine yet either, but suddenly I wanted us to have the chance to, wanted it very badly.

The hell with perfection, anyway.



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*Somebody had tried to kill her. Rosie was sure of it.
And the would-be killer was still out there someplace,
waiting*

Home Folks

by JEAN F. CAPRON

THEY BROUGHT ROSIE FEATHERSTONE IN on a sultry afternoon in late August, still alive, and laid her out like a corpse on the emergency room slab.

Her ears, continuing to function, picked up voices and wigwagged their fragmented messages to her brain.

“ . . . elderly white female ”

Somewhere to her left, maybe a foot away. She opened her eyes to a quarter-mile of crimson swirling mist.

“ . . . discovered next to the water fountain at the Home, near the birdbath . . . by the handyman, Olafsen ”

Olafsen? She tried to picture his familiar ruddy face, but the mists eddied in, blotting it out.

“ . . . injured her throat . . . here ”

Fingers touched the swollen tightness at her windpipe. Inside her head, Rosie screamed bloody murder.

“ . . . fractured some bones in her right wrist . . . hit her forehead on the concrete birdbath and laid it open . . . here, see? ”

An ache had commenced, just above her eyes, ribboning along the brow.

Focus, she told herself groggily. She squeezed her eyes shut, working on it. And after what seemed eternity . . . a thread of memory

High noon. Sun making dribblets of sweat along her spine. Sneaking gnarled fingers to pluck a scarlet bloom from the posies bordering the fountain. Seeing — no, feeling — the giant shadow of a hand swish

forward. Sudden sharp pain at her gullet. And then —

The ache attached itself to her temple, blazed briefly, sizzling along every seam in her skull, and then died to an ashen blur

SHE WAS STILL AROUND, THE FOLLOWING WEEK. And although there was more pain, Rosie had lost the ability to advertise that fact to the hospital staff. Her voice had deserted her, shrinking to a furry whisper. The fractured wrist remained cocooned in its plaster cast prison. And the eyesight seemed everlastingly blurred, occasionally spiced up by flashes of color. But there was nothing wrong with her hearing. And the gray matter was still functioning, grinding out thoughts, and, during the long nights, nibbling at the edges of a memory that she dared not explore.

Her doctor held out hope. "Tests show no permanent damage," he assured her. "Give it a little time, Rosie." And the nurses — a Schneider and a Bascomb (great kidders) — teased her unmercifully about her double-shiner, received when she'd hit the birdbath. Ordinarily, she'd have joined in on the laughter.

Silence had never been Rosie Featherstone's style. In fact, silence — long, lonely stretches of it (plus, of course, the arthritic hip) — had forced her into the Honeyvale Home for Adults in the first place. After Sam's lingering illness, and the married daughter's move to the Coast, thus stripping Rosie's life of the grandchildren, she tried to make do with the Maple Avenue neighbors. One by one they had died off or left town. And the newcomers had arranged no time in their busy schedules for a seventy-year-old widow who had lost the knack for striking up friendships with strangers

Schneider was the nosy one. During a back rub, one evening, she probed, "How did it happen, Mrs. Featherstone? Did somebody push you? I should think they'd . . . investigate"

Rosie's muscles tensed, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Then Bascomb, the scoffer, cut in with, "Oh come off it, Schneider! She obviously slipped and fell. I mean, she does have that trick hip."

And Rosie relaxed, glad to let go of the troubling possibility.

Still, when it came time to return to the Home, she found herself less than eager. Somebody else might have labeled her reluctance Fear.

Her good pal, Mina Stokes, who wouldn't know Fear if she fell over it, arranged the details of Rosie's homecoming celebration. Snowy-haired, with the wiry vitality of a much younger woman, Mina was the take-charge type. Impulsive, warm-hearted, chatty, she loved to

create a stir. She did have a touch of emphysema, aggravated by her three-packs-a-day habit; and although she talked of "taking the cure," the other residents gave odds that she'd go to her grave reaching for one last butt, and (as Bob, the paraplegic, put it) asking St. Peter for the match.

She had big plans. "We'll hold it on Thursday afternoon," she decided. "In the picnic grove down by the brook. We'll cook hamburgers and franks over the outdoor grill, the chef will bake a WELCOME HOME ROSIE cake, we'll have ice cream and punch. We'll festoon the trees with paper garlands and Japanese lanterns . . . hire outside entertainment . . . and we'll dance . . ." She hopped up and broke into a noisy two-step, then sat down heavily, wheezing. "And then we'll sing all the old songs around the open fire . . ."

Thoroughly alarmed at the scope of Mina's thinking, Rosie opened her mouth to protest. The words were there, her voice wasn't.

"That's all right, dearie." Mina patted the plaster cast. "I know how pleased you are."

Given a little luck, the whole thing might have gone off well. But Lady Luck blows both hot and cold. And Thursday had to be Her day off.

THE DISASTERS STARTED SMALL. First of all, the chef goofed up the cake. "'WELCOME HOME RUTHIE'," Mina fumed. "Can you beat that?"

It would appear that somebody could.

Some of the festooned garlands succumbed, early-on, to a stiff breeze that dropped them into the fruit punch. And the "outside entertainment" failed to show, necessitating a last minute drafting of a harmonica-playing resident of the Home, two Girl Scouts with loosely-strung guitars, and the chef's helper, who could carry a tune and recall most of the old songs.

Things seemed to settle down after that. Rosie managed to feed her face with her awkward left hand, then she and Mina, stuffed to the gills, shuffled to a nearby bench and watched their world drift by. Almost like old times. Except that now Mina, who didn't miss much, supplied the eyes, a voice, and her own tart comments, while Rosie, cradling her broken wing to her, concentrated on the listening.

"Here comes Bob Medford," Mina stage-whispered. "Over by the grill. He's wheeling his chair in, to barbecue a frank." Creak of wheels, followed by a sizzle, as frankfurter met grids. "The frank's on his paper plate, growing cold, and he's just sitting there like a lump!" Even worse, she reported at intervals, he wasn't touching his cake;

and, when asked, he refused flatly to join in on the group singing.

Oh, Bob was in a mood all right. His wife, Carla, had come in, earlier, to get his signature on a disability check. They'd quarreled (Rosie had caught the angry whiffs of it through his opened bedroom door). And, moments later, Carla had breezed past Mina and Rosie, steaming from both ears. Which was a shame, considering she only showed at the Home twice a month. To collect Bob's signature. As Mina often said, Carla Medford was a hard one to get to know.

"And will you look at Stephan," Mina took note. "Can you beat that?"

Rosie conjured up Stephan Crosley in her mind: a hulking young man with vacant eyes and a jagged scar creasing his forehead.

Stephan was wolfing down food like a half-starved animal. Mina described, in scandalized tones, his progress through three hamburgers and a plate slopped high with ice cream and cake. "But of course the poor soul can't help it," she added, more kindly. "I mean, he does have this . . . problem."

They all knew Stephan's problem. He had been injured, the summer before, in a boating disaster that had killed his wife. And although he could talk, the words were simple, like a child's. He never spoke of the incident. What details did seep through came from his sister, Jessica, who visited him now and then. Jessica had shown them pictures of the wife (a beautiful platinum-blonde, judging by the Kodak snaps), standing on the deck of a fishing trawler, shapely in her cherry-toned short-shorts, proudly displaying an out-sized muskie.

Bennett Greene, whose wife had run off with his business partner years before, held himself aloof from the activity, looking (as Mina put it) more sour than usual. Bennett had been a Home resident since his nervous breakdown the autumn of '78, and Time had done nothing for his disposition. Women, in all shapes and conditions, seemed high on his blacklist. But Mina, whose cheery line of patter could thaw the frost from the Klondike, had been working on him. "Nobody's hopeless," she would say comfortably, even as he snubbed her

OLD JUDD RAN HIS TONGUE ALONG THE HARMONICA, setting up for a square dance. The Girl Scouts whipped into action a half-pace behind him. At the Home, those who could, usually did. "Singles" gradually melded into "couples," there was a scuff of dancing feet searching for the rhythm, and then, blurs of bright color flitted past Rosie.

"Oh, my, what you're missing," Mina chortled from behind her hand. "The lit-tle lovebirds!"

Frank Cavanaugh and Lulu Sweeney, of course. A "hot item" at the Home. Lovey-dovey at eighty. It almost gave a person reason for hope.

"They're heading for those rocks by the brook, hand-in-hand," Mina announced. "Lulu's wearing that snappy little cerise number her daughter bought her last month. And now Frank's sweeping off a flat rock with his hat, so his sweetie can sit down." She laughed good-humoredly, then yawned, as if already wearying of the subject.

Flash of cerise, against background of pale gray rock. Darker blur, where Frank would be. Rosie's eyes could make out that much.

The afternoon sun, slipping westward in a sullen sky, was taking its toll. Beside her, Mina had lapsed into a doze, punctuated by wheezy snores. The music seemed louder, heavier, now — strangely out-of-rhythm with the pulsebeat behind Rosie's eyelids. She found herself nodding

Her ears picked up the measured sound that pulled her back to alertness. Footsteps, behind her. And she didn't need 20/20 vision to know whose. Chris Olafsen had a limp that telegraphed his presence like grubby fingerprints on a mirror. He paused. She could feel his eyes on her. He cleared his throat, as if preparing to speak. And then, changing direction, he clumped away.

Rosie had experienced mixed emotions about Chris from the beginning. And the troubling sensation that a part of her brain knew something about the man that it wasn't telling.

Apparently, she was the only one to catch it: a guttural sound coming hoarsely past human lips. Then the blurred movement of Shadow thrusting forward, hurtling past her. A startled yelp. The thickened splash of something — someone — slipping from rock, colliding with water. A panicky jig-jag of cerise. And then, all sound, out there, dissolving, blending with the quickened beat of harmonica and guitar. She tried out her voice, and, finding none, poked Mina.

From somewhere beyond her, Rosie picked up Chris's gait — at first dragging, then moving with unexpected speed. And the realization chilled a vulnerable part of her. Chris Olafsen, the Home handyman, was on the scene. Available again.

Mina came to life in the middle of a snore. "Hey," she croaked. She was on her feet: "Hey! *All of you* !"

SHE FILLED ROSIE IN ON SOME DETAILS LATER. Of how Chris was the first one to make it to the stricken couple, the first to free Lulu Sweeney's damaged body from the downstream rubble, the first to work on Frank and breathe him back to life.

Bob had watched silently from the shelter of his wheelchair, creak-

ing away only after the local coroner had checked out Lulu and made it official. Stephan had rediscovered the cake, and was gobbling down great chunks of icing, bypassing the whole disaster. Bennett Greene, who had been skulking in the background earlier, was nowhere to be seen. Enveloped in a haze of confusion, Frank Cavanaugh had been able to totter back to the Home.

"Frank kept muttering about feeling somebody's fingers at his throat. And Lulu being attacked, then pushed." Mina paused, obviously working it over in her mind. "Of course he didn't actually see anyone"

As she, Rosie, hadn't actually seen anyone.

"Although those black-and-blue dents at the base of Frank's neck do look suspicious," Mina decided. "I hear the police will be questioning all of us. Including," she added, "Chris Olafsen."

Chris again.

Rosie concentrated on a mental image of the man as she remembered him. About her age, of medium height, stocky, with pepper-gray hair and faded blue eyes. She recalled the day, six months before — the first morning he'd reported for work at the Home. She could still feel that almost overwhelming sense of what? Familiarity? Yet, her common sense had told her she'd never before met his particular combination of nose-mouth-eyes, gravelly voice, studied limp. Why, then, had the feeling persisted?

"All I'm saying is," Mina dug deeper, "what do we really know about Olafsen? For instance, where did he come from? Does he have a wife? Family? He never discusses his past. And . . ." her voice lowered, "is it just coincidence he happened onto yet another catastrophe? I mean, doesn't it make you wonder?"

Even if she'd had a voice, Rosie would have avoided picking up on that one. And she wasn't sure why.

LULU'S WAKE WAS ALMOST BARE OF SURVIVING RELATIVES. Her daughter, son-in-law, and a second cousin arrived together, eyed the marred waxen face in the plush casket, spoke in hushed tones, then left together. Most of the Home folks showed for the final service, to give her a decent send-off. Frank, subdued, remote. Bob, slumped in his wheelchair, looking glum. Stephan, munching noisily on an apple throughout the eulogy. Bennett had begged off attending, citing a headache. Stage-whispering a running account of who-was-there-and-who-wasn't, Mina noted crisply that Chris was sitting in the last pew, next to the exit. As if poised for flight.

After the service, a man — a stranger — had caught up with Chris

outside the chapel, and they were huddled together somewhere between the tea roses and the forsythia bushes. Rosie had deduced that much. Goaded by an overpowering need to make sense out of formless suspicion, she groped to within hearing distance and let the ears take over.

She picked up low-pitched fragments. The stranger's urgent: "Well? *Did* you" mumble, mumble. Chris's sharp: "No! No way! You must know . . . I couldn't"

A brief exchange that her ears couldn't quite decipher. Her furtive step toward the forsythia. Stumble over flagstone. Abrupt trip to the knees.

And the humiliation of the stranger and Chris Olafsen helping her up and dusting her off.

She made her way to Mina's room and sat, stoically, while her friend swallowed, whole, the plot-line of a favorite TV soap opera. And half-listened, while Mina recited her usual detailed rundown: "... Marlene is pregnant, see and she remembers sleeping with Philip, but hopes the baby is Brad's. Naturally. And even more exciting," her voice warmed to the subject, "Stella's trial for murdering George's ex-wife, Sybil, comes up tomorrow . . . but her long-lost father has turned up at last, and he plans to . . . testify" Her voice trailed off. And then, "Speaking of murder," she said, "I wonder what Chris and that policeman were so busy discussing?"

A question that deserved to be explored.

HUDDLED IN A ROCKING CHAIR ON THE FRONT PORCH of the Home (away from the comings and goings of the others), Rosie allowed the mid-afternoon sun to filter in and dissolve a creeping coldness. She needed time to think, to weigh, to sift. A persistent . . . *something* kept pecking at the edges of her memory, needling like a blood-thirsty mosquito. It could be that . . . once she'd laid out all the pieces in her mind . . . gathered together the fragments

Chris Olafsen. Was *he* the answer?

She would concentrate on somebody else.

Sam. Aah. Definitely. Her beloved Sam, as he had been, before Before.

He'd been a big man, with workshirt stretched thin over hairy chest, collar always too tight for his neck. He had brawny forearms, and a deep, rumbling voice that could be heard into the next block when he yelled (and murmured, soft as a summer breeze, when he loved). There had been laughter in him. And loyalty. The good old-fashioned kind. They'd worked side-by-side in their small printshop,

during the tough times, and had made a go of it. "Oh we're a great team, Rosie," Sam would say. "We're like a pair of scissors. Let anyone get between our blades and try to split us up, and it's . . . SNIP . . ."

And yet, toward the end, when the malignancy had clawed at him, and, like a ravenous tapeworm, had chewed the flesh from under his skin, leaving great saucer eyes in a pinched yellowing face, a scrawny neck, arms like . . . a chicken's . . .

"Rosie?" from somewhere out there. A flit of shadow. And then, inches away, "Rosie, you're crying. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Chris Olafsen. How long had he been standing there, watching her?

She stayed still, not rocking, barely breathing. And after a while he went away.

ROSIE'S WEDNESDAY VISIT TO HER DOCTOR, and the results of his thorough examination, should have picked up her spirits.

"The wrist is healing nicely," he said. "I'll remove that cast next month. Although," he added, "for the life of me I can't understand why you're not yet speaking. Or why those eyes aren't focusing." He paused, considering. And then, quietly, "What's holding up progress, Rosie? What are you afraid of?"

Afraid? Rosie sat ramrod-straight, her mouth taut, feeling the sting in his flatly stated words. And sensing challenge: *Prove me wrong, Rosie . . .*

Only later, on the way home (with Mina in tow), did she acknowledge the truth to herself: Rosie Featherstone had misplaced the ability to prove anything.

Not that Mina would notice. Ever since the week before, when she'd finally caught the eye of Bennett Greene, and rediscovered Love, she'd been scheming, proving points of her own.

She had got it into her head to organize a two-peopled picnic for Saturday. No matter that she'd developed a chest cold, triggering the emphysema, causing her to wheeze like a steam engine. No matter that the mid-September afternoon had developed into a bone-chiller, with rain threatening.

The whole idea was, to reach Bennett where he lived. "At least we talk to each other now," she confided. "He thinks I'm just being friendly, ha-ha. Anyway, when I asked him to meet me at Chigger Falls, I said I'd bring the box lunch if he'd bring a thermos of coffee, and he said . . . well, maybe. Which of course means, yes." She let

that sink in, then rushed on. "I'll wear my chocolate-brown pantsuit and that tangerine cable-stitched cardigan sweater my son sent me. And the new walking shoes. And I'll ask the chef to put up salmon salad sandwiches . . . and deviled eggs" She wheezed, then smothered a cough.

Was it Mina's cough that rang tiny warning bells inside Rosie's skull? Or something else — something buried in the many words that Mina had babbled? An image of Bennett Greene flicked into her thoughts, clinging there as if begging to be explored. But Rosie's brain, suddenly wary of reaching out for new possibilities, clanked shut that door

SATURDAY WAS ALSO DESTINED TO GIFT BOB MEDFORD with his Moment to Remember. Carla's lawyer had sent an official "Dear John," enumerating in ominous detail her financial demands. She would no longer visit him at the Home; and since he obviously was not going to recover his full-manhood status, she felt justified in retaining custody of the house, the furniture, the pedigreed poodle — and, of course, her child from a previous marriage. That last was a telling dig, since, as Bob glumly put it, his ability to father anything human had been reduced, by Fate, to zilch.

Mina, normally the first to spot a royal case of the blues, was bubbling over with her "news too good to keep"; and, in a mood to confide, she let Bob (and any other Home resident within earshot) in on her cozy picnic plans.

From where she sat, Rosie could almost feel Bob stiffen. And after Mina had soared away on her pink cloud, the urgent need to speak out, to say anything that would relieve his pain, took hold of her. The doctor had insisted she could talk. Meaning to, no matter what the cost, she delivered a stern message to her mouth, cleared her throat, and —

"Rosie," Bob whispered huskily next to her ear, "what say you and I go over to Chigger Falls this afternoon and see Mina in action?"

Which shouldn't be difficult. Chigger Falls was manmade, amateurishly put together. A pygmy-sized cascade rushing over piled-high rocks, downstream of the brook. With Rosie hanging on, helping, Bob could make it in minutes in his wheelchair. And if she'd guide the chair in whatever direction he ordered, they could arrive by three o'clock. In plenty of time to watch what was going on.

He suspected Bennett Greene's intentions. "That one's a bitter old man, out for revenge. Just because his . . . wife" Uncomfortable pause. Bob regrouped. "What I mean is, I know hostility when I see it. And Mina is too fine a lady to become involved with that jerk. I just

don't — *trust* —" And then, as if propelled by a new and terrible suspicion, "What's the holdup, Rosie? Shake a leg . . . !"

IT SEEMED SENSIBLE TO KEEP OUT OF SIGHT, yet close enough to view (and hear) what was going on.

From behind a scrub elm, and hidden by brush foliage, Bob whispered a running account: "She's sitting on that old stump this side of the Falls. Now she's looking at her watch . . . tapping her foot . . . scowling . . . lighting a cigarette . . ."

A mist-like rain had blown in, settling on Rosie's hair and face. She hunched forward and shivered.

"Now she's getting up . . . glancing about . . . puffing on her butt . . ."

A spasm of coughing followed Mina's raspy wheeze.

"Near as I can tell, Bennett Greene's nowhere around." Pause. New thought. "Hey, Rosie . . . could it be, the old coot's standing our friend Mina up?" Then, softly, "Poor Mina, all dressed up in her pretty red sweater, and no place to go."

His words filtered into Rosie's thinking, taking their time as they arranged themselves, like jigsaw puzzle pieces searching for the proper niches. And then they clicked into place.

"I suppose we should go back, before they send out a search party for us." Bob laughed, a hollow little sound. "Not that anyone knows . . . or cares" Silence. And then, recalling, "Oh, yeah, Chris Olafsen knows. It seemed safer to tell someone. Just in case something — unforeseen —"

Rosie's brain was still digesting the new knowledge, working furiously on what she would do, if . . .

"Are my eyes deceiving me, or is something moving, back there in the brush?"

Rosie's eyes opened wide, straining. Wanting, more than anything, to see.

"Looks almost like a . . . human being, crawling through the brush, heading for the stump. Or, is it?" Then, "Man, if I could just get out of this chair and go over and check . . . !"

Inside Rosie's cast, muscles twitched, as if recharging for battle.

Bob shifted weight. "Yeah, it's a man, all right. On his knees and inching along. But I can't quite make out . . . who" Abrupt forward movement. And then, "Watch it, Minal He's —"

"STEPHAN!" Rosie's voice rocketed past its hiding place, exploding from her throat.

Time hung there, waiting. A tight little world, holding its breath.

And then Stephan moved.

And Rosie — eyes unlocked and seeing — moved.

Mina had gone zombie. Only the raspy breathing and a tremor at her knees showed life. She would be easy prey.

Stephan, operating on animal instinct, had sensed that. A part of his brain was gauging Rosie's chances of making it to Mina first. He paused to glance over his shoulder. No one in sight. He turned to eye Bob, helpless in the wheelchair. Saw no challenge there. Raised from his haunches, and glided in for the kill.

The hip would have to act up. Pain shot like a microscopic arrow along Rosie's right thighbone and into her joint socket. Still, one foot followed the other, in ragged pursuit. She stumbled once, caught Mina's sharp cry, righted herself and broke into a loping run.

Behind her, Bob was yelling up a storm.

Stephan had made it to Mina. His strong fingers bit into her shoulders, then reached, with knowing sureness, for the throat.

Mina's screech faded to a bubbly rattle. Her spine, arched for combat, abruptly went limp. An open-and-shut death scene.

Yet, not so open-and-shut. Rosie's feet had found a toehold, and were burrowing in for dear life.

Sensing distraction, Stephan eased his grip to kick out at her. A miscalculation.

Rosie leaned forward, muscles tensed and eager for action. They found it at the base of Stephan's left kneecap.

His mouth opened in a thin scream. As he went down, he lunged at her, catching her in the ribs.

From a prone position, she made rapid arm motions, thinking to hit another vulnerable spot. But Stephan had regained his strength. And Rosie was his prime target.

His fingers were sharp little knives against her gullet, bearing down, slicing away her life. She perceived, dimly, that within split-seconds it could be over. Stephan would win after all. A part of her was ready to let go, had been ready since the passing of Sam. A still vital part felt . . . regret? Anger? She hadn't meant to be *driven* out. She'd planned for time to tell them . . . she owed them that much . . . Mina . . . Bob . . . Chris . . .

SOMETHING HAD CHANGED FOR ROSIE. Life was moving on cat's paws back into her consciousness, bringing fresh pain with it. Experimenting, she took a breath. It came, sluggishly. She tried another. Air rushed in, washing away all doubt. The steely fingers were gone.

Above her, beyond her, noises (shouts, the thumpy, grunting sounds of males scuffling) clamored for attention. She opened her eyes, then gingerly moved her head.

For a man of his years, Chris Olafsen was holding his own, grappling, thrashing out with lefts and rights, using the stronger leg to deliver blows when he could. But he was winding down, the ruddy complexion had paled to a mottled gray, it would be a matter of — moments —

They all heard the creak-groan of wheels in motion. Even Stephan, bent on the maiming, arched a glance upward.

He shifted awkwardly to one side, reaching for escape. But Bob, a master at navigating his steel prison, was not about to be stopped.

Rosie would remember, long afterward, the sound of chair wheels meeting and splintering human bone. She would hear, in her dreams, Stephan's cry. And feel the pulsating fear of a man-animal cornered at last

“ A LIT-TLE SOMETHING TO MAKE YOU SLEEP,” the Home infirmary nurse purred, holding forth a plastic cup. “Open, dearie.”

Rosie's mouth accepted the capsule gladly. Part of her was conscious of Chris, stationed like a guarding sentry at her elbow, staring down at her. For some reason, his presence helped.

“Call me a curious cat,” he said, after the nurse left, “but I'd give my eyeteeth to know how you figured it out.”

She struggled for organized thought. “The sweater,” she whispered huskily. “The cerise dress. The posies . . . hair . . . water”

She heard his low whistle of approval, just before her eyes gave up the ghost

DAYS LATER, AFTER THE EVENING MEAL, THEY HUDDLED in a loose semi-circle on the front porch — survivors, fresh from the Home's infirmary. Chris occupied the lone rocker, his face seamed and haggard in the porchlight glare. Bob Medford sat tall in his wheelchair, looking pretty comfortable with himself, and the rest of the world. Mina, her neck still swathed in gauze, perched on a nearby porch step, listening (for a change). Bennett Greene, on the step below, had become her personal shadow, explaining, arguing, pleading, ever since the Big Stand-up at Chigger Falls. Obviously preferring to play it cool, Mina had not yet deigned to let him off the hook.

Chris was holding forth: “Questions arose immediately after the drowning. The girl was a beauty. And Crosley had a reputation for

jealousy and an ugly temper. He'd openly accused her of playing around. And there were these . . . marks. On her neck. But since he'd supposedly tried to save her, then been injured, himself . . . reduced to a child-like state, you might say . . .” He grimaced as he massaged his shinbone, bearing down with gnarled fingers, working out old and new pain. “I'd been pensioned off, after forty years on the force. Put in my time, I figured. Needed the rest. But the Chief asked me to check in on this one. And since I was just sitting around counting flyspecks on the ceiling . . . what with the wife and son long gone . . .” His voice drifted toward Rosie and hung there.

Mina leaned forward. “I still don't understand why you — couldn't —”

“Nail him sooner?” His smile was bleak. “Seemed no matter how I hustled or anticipated, I was always a step behind, a minute too late. Crosley had this ungodly talent for reblending with the crowd. And without some kind of proof, we didn't dare to alert the residents. Even more scary, there was the question of what was triggering him off. We couldn't . . . quite . . .”

“For some reason, I remembered that snapshot of his wife,” Rosie put in. “The platinum hair, the red shorts . . . the water lapping at the edges of the trawler . . .”

Chris nodded. “The trigger. Like the old vaudeville skit about ‘Niagara Falls,’ and ‘Slowly I turned’ . . .”

“The image must have stuck to his mind the way a leech sticks to the skin,” Bob worked on it. “And whenever that lethal combination came up, he would repeat the act. And repeat, and repeat —”

“Until Rosie broke the code.”

During the interval of bright conversation that followed, Chris dug an ancient corncob pipe from his shirt pocket and lit up. Settling back in the rocker, he released a lazy ribbon of smoke. “Nice place you've got here,” he murmured to nobody in particular. Or was he directing it at Rosie? She couldn't be sure. “Wonder if they've got room at the Home for an old ex-cop who's grown tired of counting the same grubby flyspecks.”

Something inside Rosie stirred, as if trying to come to life.

His eyes squinted through the smoke. And then they opened just a little and worked a trail to Rosie's.

A mini-sized glow collected heat in her chest and lurched upward, catching in the pulsebeat at her throat. No man had looked at her, in that way, since —

Since Sam.

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

One of the standbys of the mystery/suspense field is the British police procedural, one reason being that there are many more than competent authors who write them. This month Peter Alding has given us a very good one, *A Man Condemned*. Detective Inspector Robert Fusil is back on the job to unravel a brutal robbery in which a guard is ruthlessly killed and, later, a conscientious police officer is murdered and then framed for having been corrupt. There is a lot of talking, as there is in real police work, but the story keeps moving and the solution, which is based on a particular weakness of the principal criminal, is very well done. You will enjoy this one. (Walker, \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

For a quick, entertaining read it is a pleasure to recommend *The Spy With His Head in the Clouds* by Marc Lovell. This pleasant book is not meant to be taken too seriously, which only adds to the fun as beginning agent Appleton Porter tries to overcome his handicap of being six feet seven. The way that he finally does this is both ingenious and hilarious. For a beginner Porter is remarkably competent as he gets involved with a British circus and some Soviet agents in the bargain. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Bob Randall, who scored a smash hit with *The Fan*, is back with a new book, *The Calling*. This time Mr. Randall has turned to the supernatural to write about a New York working housewife who is plagued by an evil force that is unrelenting.

The telephone is the means by which the demonic persecution is carried out. There is no relief in this one as the hapless victim sinks lower and lower into the trap set for her. The many admirers of *The Fan* will find this a very different work, one designed for lovers of the occult only. As such, it is very well done. (Simon and Schuster, \$12.95)



Address Unknown by Malcolm Hutton is a first novel that barely qualifies in the crime genre. An older man laid off from his work leaves his hostile wife to shelter three vagrant children in a secret underground defense facility in England. The writing is not distinguished and at the end many important questions are left unanswered. The idea is fine, but it doesn't quite come off despite one very good scene in which a villain gets his just deserts. (St. Martin's, \$9.95)



The long series of Alfred Hitchcock's anthologies is being carried on with Eleanor Sullivan, the widely-known editor at Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, doing the compiling. This latest volume is called *Tales to Make You Weak in the Knees*. It pretty much lives up to its title with some very well-known names included among the contributors. Good variety also adds to the attractiveness of this volume. (Dial Press, \$10.95)



Saratoga, New York, the famous spa and racing town, is the setting for *Saratoga Swimmer* by Stephen Dobyns. A cashiered member of the Saratoga police is given the job as head of security at a racing stable. When the owner is killed, he takes up the investigation despite his non-official status and the hostility of the local police chief. The strongest feature of this book is the realistic and accurate dialogue built around Saratoga as it is. In due time the killer is run to ground in approved manner and the prospect is opened that the protagonist may return to his old job. Obviously, this one will be of particular interest to racing fans. (Atheneum, \$12.95)



The admirers of Fredric Brown, and there are many in the followers of the genre, will be most happy to know of a new limited edition work called *A Key to Fredric Brown's Wonderland*. This very well produced short book contains an essay on Brown by Newton Baird, reminiscences by Elizabeth Brown and Harry Altshuler, and an illustrated, annotated bibliographical checklist of Brown's works. To fill out this attractive offering, there is a brief work by Brown himself, "It's Only

Everything." This is a very scholarly work, well conceived and very well executed. The hard cover edition is sold out, paperback copies are available at \$8.95 from Talisman Literary Research, Box 445, Georgetown, California.



Eaton K. Goldthwaite, who is well-known in the crime writing field, has a new work, *First You Have to Find Him*. Although this is in no danger of becoming a classic, it is a well-told tale about a newspaper editor who sets out to find his missing twin brother, a partner in a very successful Long Island art gallery. Since the brother is a noted womanizer, there are complications and eventually The Mob comes in. The free-swinging wife of the other partner in the gallery adds to the action. There is some nice use of language when the scene shifts to an upstate rural area and different kinds of people entirely take over. This is a good, entertaining work that will not disappoint the author's many readers. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$9.95)



David E. Fisher makes another appearance with his new book, *Variation on a Theme*. An unsuccessful playwright tries to double as a private eye without too much success in this story which has a minor league theater background. The person who straightens things out is Detective Lieutenant Karen Douglass, a gal who is not above using woman's intuition from time to time. She does a satisfactory job and, happily, does not make a big thing of her sex where her work is concerned. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$10.95)



PAPERBACK NOTES: Two genuine classics are now available in paperback: Christianna Brand's famous *Green For Danger* which was made into a memorable film, and Hillary Waugh's pioneer police procedural, *Last Seen Wearing*, which is still one of the best of its kind ever written. Both are from Perennial (Harper and Row) and are \$2.50 each. Very highly recommended. A collection of very short stories by Edmund Crispin called *Fen Country*, offered by Penguin for \$3.50, is a bit heavy despite the high quality of the work. Jonathan Gash's recent, excellent *The Judas Pair* is out from Dell for \$2.25 — all about antiques and a lot of fun. ●

It was a principle of economics that had a profound effect on his life!

The Law Of Diminishing Returns

by GARY ALEXANDER

BEFORE WE BEGIN OUR FIRST CLASS OF THE SEMESTER, I wonder how many of you have attended a college-level economics course before. Hm, no one? Well, that's just fine, since this is an introduction, a survey class. Economics 101. Fresh, unbiased minds, I've discovered in my teaching experience, are most receptive to new concepts. Good. Very good. Forgive the impersonality of that question, but anonymity is an unfortunate by-product of teaching at a large state university in lecture halls the size of auditoriums. Sadly, if there *are* former students among you, we may never have met before.

This environment, though, and our small class size, despite obvious drawbacks, affords me an extraordinary challenge. It allows me to present the subject matter in a creative way and it gives you students the opportunity to interact with your professor on a one-to-one basis. I shall immediately take advantage of this intimate relationship by skipping the introductory chapters of our text — clogged with tedious truisms, as most are — and move directly to a principle of economics that has had a profound effect on my own life: The Law of Diminishing Returns.

Gentlemen, let me first state the law as our textbook would. It refers to the quantity of *extra* output achieved when we add equal *extra* units of a varying input to a *fixed* amount of some other input. Ah, though I have trimmed and paraphrased that assertion, I detect a roomful of blank stares! Please accept that we economists love our abstractions, our graphs and charts, our academic double entendres. A blackboard example might illuminate:

ABC MANUFACTURING COMPANY, INC.
(assuming no potential for plant expansion)

| <i>Man-units of labor</i> | <i>Total Production</i> | <i>Extra production gained by extra unit of labor</i> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 0 | 0 | 5000 |
| 1 | 5000 | 2000 |
| 2 | 7000 | 1500 |
| 3 | 8500 | 800 |
| 4 | 9300 | 500 |
| 5 | 9800 | |

And so on. Hm, the classroom is so thick with incomprehension you could cut it. This is also quite understandable. Obviously this model is as abstract and useless as the previously-stated axiom. After all, what are we talking about here? The manufacturer of muffler bearings, of chrome-plated grommets? And who the hell cares?

Whatever it is, the basic principle has been proven valid throughout history. In plain English, what we are saying is that there is a limit to what you can do with a small operation, a limit that precludes efficient economies of scale. Our abstract owner of the abstract ABC Company is — God bless his greedy, American Dream-seeking heart — trying to make more bucks by hiring more warm bodies to work in his fixed, unexpanded operation, and it's catching up to him. In essence, he's getting too big for his britches and if he keeps it up, ABC is going right down the toilet.

NOW LET'S COVER, ALAS, THE ALLUSION I MADE EARLIER to my own dismal experience with The Law of Diminishing Returns. In the production columns, we shall substitute something I felt at the time was much more dear than mere mammon.

Witness.

PLAGIARISM OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

| <i>Number of papers plagiarized</i> | <i>Units of career enhancement (an arbitrary index)</i> | <i>Extra enhancement</i> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 0 | 0 | |
| 1 | 10 | 10 |
| 2 | 19.5 | 9.5 |
| 3 | 28.5 | 9 |
| 4 | 28.5 | 0 |
| 5 | <i>undetermined</i> | 0 |

Please observe in this model, class, that the expected diminishment is much more sudden; not at all the smooth curve we have been led to expect.

You have all heard the old saying: publish or perish. Unfortunately, in my haste, I copied the latter papers in the model verbatim, and the editor of the prestigious journal to which I submitted the manuscript had knowledge of both the papers and their authors.

I notice that you are all sitting upright at your desks. Your interest is piqued. Good. Excellent! Please pay close attention to the next chart, class. It gets better and better.

SALE OF NONEXISTENT GOLD MINING STOCK
(i.e. — boiler room operation)

| <i>Number of telephone salespersons</i> | <i>Daily net profit to owner of the firm (me) (in dollars)</i> | <i>Extra profit added by additional employee (in dollars)</i> |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0 | 0 | 500 |
| 1 | 500 | 450 |
| 2 | 950 | 375 |
| 3 | 1325 | 300 |
| 4 | 1625 | -1625 |
| 5 | 0 | |

It is apparent that there are strong similarities in this model to the previous one, with a major exception. The negative integer. We see this seldom in the private sector unless a sudden catastrophe occurs, such as a fire or a bankruptcy. Neither happened in my case, nor was

expansion of the enterprise impractical. The addition of *risk* proved to be my downfall.

Why was I compelled to make such an abrupt career change? Well, it goes back to the prior model on plagiarism. I had years and years invested in the study of economics, business, and finance, a doctorate degree which qualified me to do little else but teach at the university level. So you must understand that the options available to a defrocked assistant professor of economics are somewhat limited. The above venture seemed logical, a lateral career adjustment in my field, if you will.

LOWER YOUR HANDS, GENTLEMEN. I ANTICIPATE YOUR question, and forgive me for rambling. Yes, of course Salesperson Number Five was a federal agent. That was made abundantly clear at my trial.

Unfortunately, my judge was up for reelection, running on a platform of toughness against white collar crime. Thus my unusually-severe prison sentence.

Yes, I hear the siren too, gentlemen. It's slightly reminiscent of a classroom bell, but I think it's coming from Cell Block A. A minor altercation, perhaps.

I'm sure the guards will arrive soon to accompany us to our quarters, so I'll make this brief. First, I would like to thank the State Penal System and Various Falls Community College for permitting me to teach this course. You gentlemen will receive college credit under their extension program, and my academic qualifications will not be wasted during my incarceration.

Quickly, let me give you your assignment for next week's session: Chapter Five — Supply and Demand. If you'll read it, we should be able to start right in discussing it in practical terms. I'll be at the blackboard a lot, working out our models in graphical form. I do love graphs!

But I think we'll skim over the usual free-market examples and move on to areas of more immediate interest. Bribing of the screws, for example, and how adherence to the theory of supply and demand can benefit us personally in respect to increased goods and services. Privileges. Rope. Shovels. Weapons and information on prospective escape routes, even. We all know how little they earn, so the curves we will be drawing may intersect at points attractive to all concerned. The potential is certainly there, and all we've lacked before is a coherent system.

Think it over, gentlemen. I believe this would be an ideal semester project. Class dismissed. ●

He needed a fix. He needed it bad. And he knew just where to get one. Of course he'd have to kill to get it, but that didn't matter. He'd do worse than that to get what he needed!

Death Grip

by PHIL RICHARDS

ALL HELL WAS ON FIRE IN HIM. His legs trembled. Convulsions were knotting his muscles. He clamped his dry lips, trying to halt their twitching; but nothing could be done about the sniffles which would help to tell what he was. He tightened the grip on the open knife. It didn't still the tremor in his hand.

Rounding the point where Fourth Street and Washington Place merged into Sheridan Square, he tried to walk briskly, like a business man. It wouldn't fool any one, not with blood down his coat front. It'd take a blind man to miss that he was a smack-head going out of his gourd.

Oh, for five bags and a needle! Give him escape from everything; get him out of this rotten, savage civilized world!

Patrol cars were tearing him to shreds. They were screeching down from Homicide West, screeching up from Centre Street, their damn searchlights swiveling.

All he needed was a patrol car cruising along Washington Place. It gave him the crawls to think what a field day the cops would have. Oh, they wouldn't do a thing — except beat him into one gigantic, oozing bruise. Resisting arrest, they'd say. Nursing their knuckles, they always said that.

And the cons in the slammer! He'd sold a mugger to the cops for enough low-quality street stuff to float four hours on a cloud. The scag-

hounds would have done it, too, if they'd been as starved as he for a rush, because heroin tells you that the next fix is an absolute must. The cons knew that, but they also knew what to do about informers. When they got through, he'd be ready to barbecue.

He looked bitterly at the bloody rag around the knife which had silenced the old woman on Bleecker. Blasted old hag, why did she have to scream! All he'd wanted was her purse. Couldn't she see that he was strung out? She lived in the Village. She must have known about the agony of coming down. Makes you a maniac. Makes nothing important except getting it and shooting it.

Crossing Washington Place, he got to the door of the five-floor walkup where Dr. Ardrey lived. A patrol car swung around the church corner, heading west toward Sheridan Square.

"You're not getting me, you bums! This isn't the end of Mel Tressler!"

HE DARTED INTO THE FOYER, SPARED BRIEFLY because the searchlight was probing the south side of the street.

But now a beam of light shone in. He pressed against the east wall, his heart bucking like a bronc. What a rotten go. Somebody had phoned in, and sirens were shrieking from all points before he could rifle the purse. He'd done Murder One without even a dribble out of a dirty needle as his reward. It was too much.

The patrol car stopped. Don't come unraveled, he told himself. The glare of the searchlight put a sheen on his crimson-splashed coat. He must have slit the old woman's aorta. Just the Tressler luck. Already cold turkey, he felt as though his nerves were being braised by a blowtorch. He couldn't get in; he couldn't get out. They had him skewered.

All he had was the knife — a sliver of steel against .38s! There was no fair shake here at all. Seeing the blood, the cops wouldn't beat him up; they'd blow him away.

No! He wouldn't let them blast his dream. He intended to mug his way into decent clothes. Then he'd shoplift until the take would enable him to buy Persian scag, the ayatollah's best. He'd buy it by the kilo, selling half kilos for ten grand. No street pushing. He'd lounge in a penthouse and shoot up five times a day.

Buoyed by visions of floating on clouds of ecstasy, he was ready to slash the cop's gun hand the moment the door opened. Slash, get the gun, shoot, and use the falling body to shield against the backup cop.

Desperation wouldn't do it, nor fear of a short ride to the morgue. But he had the necessary extra. So starved for heroin, he'd move like a ferret.

They weren't cheating him. He'd put on the cop's coat and hat, get the guns and money, and drive the patrol car to a Hudson River warehouse where cash would buy a fix and a change of clothes.

To hell with Dr. Ardrey. The devious so-and-so had put him on the skids and deserved a touch of Tressler surgery, but it didn't have to be tonight. The important thing was to get in on the tidal wave of Iranian heroin which the ayatollah was flooding into America. It was priced higher than gold, but they said you didn't know a high until you shot up with Persian.

The searchlights went out. Tressler balanced himself. He was shivering in every fiber. If ever a man needed skag! One slip! He begged his heroin-hungry reflexes to give him the speed of light.

Voices reached him. He heard gears, the steps of a pedestrian. The stranger passed the house and the car moved west toward Sheridan Square. The cops had merely paused to question a passer-by. It was too simple for those simpletons. A slight turn of the head toward the east would have revealed a beautiful headline arrest.

Tressler let out a *whoosh*. It was almost like having a rush. That was the way it bounced: one man lives, another dies. Now for Dr. Bartley Ardrey!

HE PUSHED TOP-FLOOR BUTTONS AND THE LOCK BUZZED.

Slipping in, he strode down the long hallway to the sunken alcove under the stairs where he noted that Dr. Ardrey had letters in his lock box. Other tenants hadn't picked up their mail, so people would be coming in. He tried the door which opened on a court and led down to the furnace and storerooms. He stepped onto the landing. Lights were on in a couple of apartments, but the shades were drawn. It was past the hour when the superintendent banked the coals, and he wouldn't be here again until daybreak. Tressler could drag Ardrey's body down and hide it in a storage room.

The doctor would have money, maybe a lot. Tressler could wear his clothes. In Ardrey's second-floor apartment, he'd shave, shower and change. Eat something, too. Perhaps he'd find a bit of scag; methadone, for sure, which he detested. But it would help take the junkie look off him. He'd come out looking like a big shot. Yes, indeedy, Mel Tressler was on the rise, a penthouse the next stop, then ayatollah Persian and the spike mainlining him to Cloud Nine.

With the areaway door opened a crack, he watched tenants pick up their mail. Soon all the boxes were empty except Ardrey's.

He thought, rather pleasantly, of the knife fight two years ago on

Christopher Street. A junkie thought he could tough himself into some free smack, but Tressler could open a penknife as fast as a switch-blade. The junkie went to Bellevue, really carved, and Tressler got to Dr. Ardrey's walkup home office with a deep defense wound in his right hand.

A well setup, saturnine, tired young man who'd aged a lot in Vietnam field hospitals, Bartley Ardrey got Tressler's jacket off, rolled up a sleeve and tightened a tourniquet above the wound.

"Mugger, Doc," Tressler explained. "Right off Sheridan Square. Ain't no police protection any more."

"You lost a lot of blood," Ardrey said. "I'm taking you to St. Vincent's."

"No hospital, Doc!"

"Why not? Oh, I see. Tracks, eh?"

"Tracks, nothing. I'm a diabetic. I take shots, see?"

"All right. Here's another!"

THE DEVIOUS, DECEPTIVE, TWO-FACED, TREACHEROUS so-and-so, Tressler thought indignantly. He'd tried to ward off the hypo, but the loss of blood had collaborated with the doctor. He'd gone to jail on an ADW — assault with a deadly weapon. With cells all but bursting with bums, he was out in a year. He'd done all right as a pusher, but now his luck was gone and his clients with it.

Thanks to Dr. Ardrey, he'd been reduced to rolling drunks and knocking over old ladies. When he got ahead a little and sold a few bags, he got taken off by addicts in basements, doorways and the rear of warehouses.

In the slammer they tried to talk rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation — from *what*? Hell, if there's anything better than horse, he thought, bring it on. It put you in a world of your own. You never got from a woman anything like the ecstasy of a rush. And how else could he get back into \$500 suits and behind the wheel of a Mercedes?

He'd be an importer, buying ayatollah prime, never even seeing the stuff, and selling it down the line through six levels of milk-sugar cuts. But he'd be in his penthouse on wings of pure Iranian joy, yet always careful not to OD.

Footsteps. He peered from the alcove. Ah, ha! Dr. Ardrey was coming down the corridor, wearing a nice pin-stripe which would look natty on Tressler. Ardrey had circles under his eyes, poor fellow. Must have had a bad go in the OR. But no matter. The Betsy-girl in Tressler's hand, the blade that already had explored an old lady's

aorta, would give Ardrey the R.I.P. treatment. What a beautiful night it had become! He stepped into view, the rag dropping from the knife.

"My God!" Ardrey exclaimed. "Tressler!"

"Help me, Doc!"

"*Help* you! God in Heaven, you're the *one*! That old woman! We tried to save her, but — Help you, huh? You're strung out. You've gone crazy, Tressler. You got to have smack. You'll do anything for smack. You want that rush, Tressler?"

"Yes, yes, I'll do anything for a fix."

"If the cops get you, what life they leave in you will go cold turkey into hell. But I've got smack, Tressler. I keep it for guys on withdrawal who want to kill themselves."

"I've got to shoot up, Doc!"

"You sure got to shoot up, Tressler. You want that rush, you want that ecstasy, you want to get rid of the hell in your guts."

"I've got to shoot up, Doc! I've got to!"

"Then hand me the knife!"

Fear for his hands shot a chill through Dr. Ardrey. He thought of the long tapering fingers which had stitched tears in heart muscles and removed Cong bullets lodged close to the spine. He thought of the countless defense wounds which would have been ruinous to a surgeon's hands.

"No!" Ardrey cried. "Don't hand it! Toss the knife! Throw it at my feet."

"Sure, Doc. Anything you say. I'm tossing it!"

Tressler made a motion as though to slide the blade along the hallway floor. But he leaped, the knife hand coming in like an uppercut.

Ardrey sidestepped. He did it neatly. In a fist fight he would have stretched the vicious man, but he couldn't untrack himself from his hands, those precious surgeon's hands which had repaired so many, many bodies.

Instead of blocking the thrust which could have sliced a hand so he could never hold a scalpel, he backed and sidestepped again, bumping the wall.

Tressler's knife tore into Dr. Ardrey's stomach.

"My God!"

"Never trust a hype, Doc!"

TORTURED MEMORY EXPLODED IN A BACKFLASH of grueling 70-hour weeks in medical school, of round-the-clock desperation over mangled bodies, of frantic battles to restore stopped hearts before the four-minute deadline, of ruptured vitals demanding total concentration

while bombs were falling, all dead-ended now, to give this silver-faced salamander his fix.

Life-support systems couldn't keep Ardrey here. The spark was going out, but this filthy crud would get his fix. Yes, yes. *His fix, his fix, his fix* beat in Ardrey's brain with each waning pulsation of a dying heart.

Fury and hatred goaded Ardrey into a driving lunge. Both fists lashed out. The doctor was alive enough to wonder how he could marshal such power. Even in full vigor he couldn't have done it, couldn't have buckled his own metacarpals, rammed Tressler's teeth through his upper lip and left a splinter of bone sticking out of the junkie's shattered jaw.

Tressler went backwards like a bulldozed wall. Falling, he pulled the knife with him and landed on his head, the crack of it against tile sounding like a dropped melon. It was the last tawdry scrap of solace granted to Dr. Ardrey.

The doctor lay face down, full length. There was no time to dwell on the terrible waste this animal had made of him. Still a doctor, he wondered if the terrific crack on the back of the head had created a *contre-coup*. A counter blow was often the real killer. Ardrey had known the opposite-side damage of a recoiled impact — a transmission of force — to pulp the frontal lobes of the brain, even smashing the roof of the eye sockets. The doctor prayed that a *contre-coup* had exterminated this vermin. But suppose it hadn't?

He had a vision of Vietnam jungles and ambushed VCs locked in odd positions which had made the corpses difficult to transport.

"Dear God," he prayed. "if I haven't killed Tressler, please keep him knocked out. Six hours, dear Father. Just six hours."

The will wasn't ready to give up. In the last struggle to survive, Ardrey grabbed Tressler's ankle and tried to get his knees under him. But the tightening of midriff muscles was more than the wound could take.

SEVERAL TIMES THROUGH THE NIGHT when his senses briefly returned and he thought his head was under a pile-driver, Tressler tried to drag himself to the areaway steps. Weakness had made him heavy, unnaturally heavy. But he was Tressler, all-tough Tressler. He wouldn't give in, even though each time he strained, he blacked out.

Now dawn was breaking. His head felt like a sledge was pounding it, but the pain was nothing to the fear racing through him. Frantically he tried to get to the courtyard door. He pulled and pulled, but he couldn't advance an inch.

Merciful Heaven, help, help! Why was everything so rotten to him? All he wanted was horse. Give him horse and he bothered no one. He didn't deserve what was happening. It wasn't daylight in his blurred eyes. The illumination in the Washington Place hallway came from blinding police lights and flash bulbs.

"Go ahead," he heard a plainclothesman urge a TV cameraman. "Get him from all angles. With fifteen cops here, give the public a view of this hyena trying to give us the slip."

"Couldn't he have broken it?" the TVman asked the medical examiner.

"With a pry-bar," the ME said. "In 'Nam we had to cut equipment and clothes off ambushed VC, they were so stiff."

"How long does it take?"

"It varies," the ME said. "Internal factors, outside temperature. But six hours usually does it."

"What's the matter, Tressler?" the plainclothesman said. "Not quite up to it, eh? I've seen you after heroin rushes when you thought you could lift a mountain."

The TV man directed his camera on Tressler's clutched ankle. "Keep trying," he urged. "Since we can't strap you in the outlawed electric chair, you owe something to the people. Let TV viewers see how murdered Dr. Ardrey trapped his killer with rigor mortis." ●

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAKERS

PHIL RICHARDS (*Death Grip*) tells us:

I have appeared in MSMM — when Leo was alive. Also sold Leo copy at Standard Magazines years ago in New York. As an associate editor of DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY, I edited at least two Mike Shayne serials.

Zito could tell Beezy had the itch and the crawls. She was like that, a nut-case who liked Zito to use his knife. She got off on the blood. Well, tonight would be something special — something they could both enjoy. They would see lots of blood!

The Keeper Of Hellsgate Inn

by MORT CASTLE

From the article "Imagining Terror," by Warren Andel, *Nostalgia Review*, November 1977:

The greatest of the horror-suspense shows of radio's Golden Age? Not the *Witch's Tale*, despite the crone's endearingly fiendish cackle, not *Inner Sanctum* and its memorable creaking door. No to the *Black Museum* and even Oboler's "Turn out your lights," *Lights Out*.

Aural horror aficionados class the syndicated *Hellsgate Inn* as the greatest nail-gnawing,

nightmare-inducing, shudder half hour ever on the air. From 1948 to 1952 — when pressure groups protested the show's overall morbidity and grisliness, thus forcing the program's cancellation — *Hellsgate Inn* attained the status of a 20th century shock classic:

Thunder. Torrential rain. Fade. Low key announcer: "Midnight. Another traveller who's taken a wrong turning on the road of life . . . and death. But there! Ahead! A small yellow beacon of light! The promise of shelter and warmth and safety." Rapid squishing footsteps. Three sharp raps reverberating like a knocking at an unholy tomb.

And then: "Welcome to Hellsgate Inn. I welcome . . . You!" The Olde Innkeeper. "Do come in. Sit by the fire . . . Perhaps we'll talk, eh? Perhaps you have a story to share to make the time pass?"

Sardonic laughter . . .

"Perhaps a black soul secret to share, hmm? Oh, you'll find me, the Olde Innkeeper, a willing listener, I assure you."

One of two sustaining characters in the series, the Olde Innkeeper was portrayed by Trennor Love. Unlike most performers of the era, he was heard only in this one program.

ZITO'S RAT-NASTY FACE GLOWED GREEN IN THE LIGHT of the dash as he carefully stayed five miles under the posted speed. Cool. Zito was always cool. Even when he was doing the stretch at Menard, like if some dude got on him, maybe about the goddamn stutter or something, Zito did not rattle. Uh-uh, he waited, cool, and when there was no one around to drop a kite on him, he settled with a length of pipe or a spoon honed razor sharp on the concrete.

But Zito could tell Beezy had the itch and crawls. She was like that. He could feel how spring tight she was without even glancing over at her.

Want to know the truth, Beezy was a nut-case. Dippy dreams. She was going to be an actress. Jane Fonda, maybe, or Redgrave.

And for sure, Beezy had done films. Lots of them. Porno loops. She was a dancer, too, the topless-bottomless joints for the polyester suit

crowd who got their jollies with warm cokes and bulging eyeballs. Show bizzy Beezy, sometimes augmenting her income with a trick or two.

But tonight, yeah, this was really the kind of scene she was into.

Beezy liked it when Zito used the knife. She got off on the blood. Different strokes, right. Her kink was her kick.

Zito turned his head, looked at her now. Street corner girl pretty face, whipping hell out of a wad of gum. Yeah, okay, turn her on, and then whacko-bam! She'd set him free.

"Uh-uh, uptight, baby?"

"No."

Bull. She was all breathy and big-eyed. She was thinking on it for sure.

"Stay cool. Zito's gonna . . . gone. Na." Pause to grab air and work on it. "Do it." Goddamn stutter. Could have been on top of the world but "Puh-puh-puh," turns you into a nerd, a jerk, a retard; that's how they all look at you.

He hung a right. There were a few houses on the winding road, but those there were Zito's idea of living right. In a long driveway flanked by sculptured hedge, he killed the lights and glided up to the red, two story house.

Easy as ice cream. The old dude lived alone. Never had company. Went out twice a week for groceries — guy had an appetite like gangbusters — and that was it.

Yeah, there was serious money here, all right. The old guy would spill his guts. Zito would have him showing where he kept the soda bottles for return.

Then — Zito smiled — the old lump would really spill his guts.

IN THE CIRCLE OF YELLOW LIGHT cast by the glass fixture above the wide front doors, Zito reached for the heavy brass knocker. He could sense Beezy's excitement. Want to see some blood, baby? Sure, sure, you nuttso. Just good clean fun.

Zito rapped three times.

It took almost a minute. Waiting never got to Zito. He was cool.

The door swung open. The figure in the entranceway was silhouetted by the foyer's light. He was tall and thin and it was the right guy so Zito slugged him in the gut.

A good one. The old man grunted, started to double, and then, as though changing his mind, turned and flopped sideways to the parquet floor. His red quilted robe flapped open. He wore short pajamas beneath the robe and his legs were white and hairless, ancient.

Zito grinned, yanking Beezy inside and kicking shut the door. He squatted to press the old man onto his back. He took out the knife. It clicked. He put the tip of the blade to the old man's parchmentlike throat. His peripheral vision traced Beezy's short trip into the living-room.

"Uh-uh . . . Okay chief," Zito said. He kept the blade as light as a first kiss, point fitted to a wrinkled valley. "Yuh-yuh do . . . what I say. Who knows? May . . . Maybe you don't get . . . uh, dead."

The old dude made gulping sounds like he'd swallowed steel wool. His violet eyes were big.

Then, with a strange calmness, the old man said, "What is it you want?"

So the guy was trying to be laidback, huh? Zito thought. Forget it. Make him rattle like a Jeep doing sixty down the mountain.

"Ooh!"

At Beezy's sudden squeal, Zito jerked up his head, but he kept the knife where it belonged.

"He's got all these pictures. Movie star pictures! And they're all signed and everything! He's in some of them."

"Huh?" Zito said.

"Here's him and Boris Karloff. It says, 'To the keeper of the lost souls, faithfully yours, William Henry Pratt, alias, Boris Karloff.' Wow!"

Beezy knelt on the other side of the fallen man. "Zito, this guy is famous!"

Stupid nut, Zito thought. He'd told her never to say his name when they were into it. Not that there were ever witnesses . . .

"Not exactly famous, child, but I did have a certain reputation. And I did know many of the great ones."

Still doing a laidback trip, Zito thought. The old dude bugged him. Maybe he was senile, didn't realize he was three slices from being dog meat.

"Yes," said the old man. "Karloff and Lugosi. Chaney . . . junior, that is. And Zucco and J. Carrol Naish and Rondo Hatton. There were others as well."

Zito's knuckles were white on the knife's handle.

"They were pleasant people," the old man said. "Nothing at all like the roles they enacted."

"Were you in movies? What's your name?" Beezy said.

Okay, Zito thought. We'll roll with this for a while. "Lay . . . Lady asked you something, chief," Zito said.

With ridiculous and infuriating calm the old man replied, "I was not

in films, my dear. Before your time, however, I was on a radio program. My name is Trennor Love."

Trennor Love, Zito thought. Fag name. Yeah, fags really squealed once you made a little nick here and another one there to keep it company.

Beezy said, "Zito! I want to talk to him. He knew some big stars. He was an actor, even. Zito, you know, I never met a *real* actor!"

The old man laughed pleasantly.

"Some did think me an actor," he said.

All right. Beezy wanted to talk with the old dude. Okay. Good. Maybe there'd be a laugh or two before the old croaker became a croak. Let's hear him rap.

Then, uh-huh, Zito would get him talking about things that really mattered. Like money.

FROM "IMAGINING TERROR:"

The lost traveller did have a story to tell. A horrendous, blood-drenched, gruesome story — revealed in appropriately melodramatic form to the Olde Innkeeper — and to the radio audience:

The butcher who used his cleaver to end his wife's incessant nagging. Sound effects man had a field day. The repeated slice-thump of the cleaver and the agonized shrieks and wails of the unfortunate female being transformed into fresh filets.

Get Off My Back. The carnival story of a freak show barker who tormented a wretched hunchback, Alfred, until the freak attempted to burn away the hideous mound of flesh on his back. We heard the hiss and crackle of bursting bubbles of tissue and muscle and the sizzling of boiling bone marrow.

Pretty Lizzie. Ernestine, the village seamstress, designed a special bridal dress for one Miss Lizzie Borden, a cursed gown that drove the maiden out of her mind. We heard the "forty whacks" — one at a time — that Miss Borden gave her father. Then Mother received the same — plus one to grow on!

Until the next to final commercial, the visitor to Hellsgate Inn unwound the macabre threads

of his story to the Olde Innkeeper — and to a shivering radio audience.

“I ENJOYED THOSE DAYS,” HE SAID. Legs crossed, the old man relaxed in a livingroom armchair. On the sofa, Beezy leaned forward, elbows on knees. Next to her, Zito sat, thinking Beezy’s ears were twitching like those of a four-year-old listening to the library lady’s story hour.

“Mr. Love,” Beezy said, “what does a person have to do to make it in show business?”

Trennor Love smiled kindly. “That’s your dream, child?”

“Uh-huh. Real stars and everything.”

Trennor Love nodded. “More than anything else, I’d say it’s the sense of conviction. An audience must believe you are the person you portray. In a few words, *that you are real*. You see, that was never a problem for me. I *was* the Olde Innkeeper.”

“You were a star!” Beezy gushed.

“I was what I was. And, I suppose, I am what I am. But, do forgive me. I fear I’ve monopolized our chat. I’m interested in you, in both of you. Why don’t you tell me about yourselves. I’m sure you have a story to tell, eh?”

“I’ve done some movies. And I dance, too, you know?” Beezy babbled.

Zito thought, listen to that. Miss Show Biz. “Shoo . . . sha-orr she acts. Porn flicks. And duh-dance! Yeah, it’s nice dancing, all right.”

“And what about yourself, young man?” Trennor Love said.

“I wha-wanted to be a disc-jockey, you know? They say . . . said I’m too tall.” He waved his knife. “In . . . Instead, I kill people.”

FROM “IMAGINING TERROR:”

With four minutes remaining in the show, it was time for the settling of accounts. In the simplistic world of popular radio entertainment, evil did not go unpunished. When the guest’s gruesome tale was at an end, the Olde Innkeeper said, “Do come with me. Your accommodations are waiting.”

Down a long hall. Footsteps echo as only a sound effects man can make an echo.

“Here, my friend, is ‘the dark room.’”

The “dark room” was never described in any detail. There were — we presumed — chains and

crosses and wheels and a special table — all the trappings of the Inquisition's most lavish torture chamber.

A wheezing. Shuffling sound of raw meat dragged across stone. A high-pitched giggle ascending to a whistling hiss . . .

Nordo!

The identity of the actor who became Nordo once a week has been lost from the annals of radio history.

To all the joyously traumatized listeners, Nordo was not an actor anyway. He was a real horror. He lived inside the Philco consoles, lurking in the maze of tubes, a slaver's smile on his sub-human face

ZITO YANKED TRENNOR LOVE FROM THE CHAIR, spun him, and cranked his arm up behind his back. He put the knife under the old man's ear.

"Zito! Don't!"

Zito tried to say, "Shut up!" but it came out a senseless sputter.

A glance at Beezy said it was okay. Maybe she didn't want it to be, but she was into it now. The look was on her face. A little blood, Beezy? Yeah. Check out the twitches. Look at the eyes.

"Mr. Love," Beezy said softly, breathily, "you know, it's not like anything personal, okay? It's just what Zito and me do. That's all."

"I understand," Trennor Love said.

"Muh-muh Move it!" Zito said. He took Love's arm up another notch. "Money. Any-anything worth money. We want it."

"Do come with me," said Trennor Love.

FROM "IMAGINING TERROR:"

Oh, the traveller struggled, but what was the use? Nordo had him. Nordo was the embodiment of all our night fears. No one might prevail against Nordo.

The Olde Innkeeper gave Nordo detailed and explicit instructions.

Nordo responded with the only line he was ever required to utter — or more exactly, grunt: "Nordo do! Nordo do!"

Nordo did:

The butcher so handy with a cleaver was hung on a meathook.

The carnival sideshow barker became a midget, his legs sawed off below the knees.

Dressmaker Ernestine had a new gown for herself, one she could never remove. Demonstrating his sewing skills, Nordo sewed it to her living flesh.

Week after week, nightmare justice, ironic and horrible, was meted out in the dark room of Hellsgate Inn

TRENNOR LOVE LED THEM DOWN TO THE BASEMENT. It wasn't what Zito had expected. There was a television console, more pictures of famous people on the panelled walls, soft chairs, a couch

A safe? Zito wondered.

"There," said Trennor Love.

There was a door in the wall.

"Uh . . . Okay." Pushing Trennor Love ahead, Zito motioned for Beezy to follow.

There was no light beyond the door. Zito saw something that looked like a shadow moving against a background of absolute black.

"Whu . . . where's the switch?"

Weird, Zito thought. He could dimly see vague outlines now, strange shapes. Oh, man! Trennor Love was a pain freak! A B and D boy! All the stuff. Chains and leather.

"There is no light," Trennor Love said. "This is the dark room."

No more games, Zito decided. Make the old dude bleed. Let him hear himself going drippity-drip.

"Nordo," Trennor Love called into the darkness. "Once more, after all these years, we have guests."

The blackness of the room seemed to coalesce into a gigantic blob. As though it were a man, or something like a man, it was stumbling toward them on things that might have been legs.

Beezy screamed.

It snuffed and grunted. It had eyes like the fire that lingers deep inside a log after the outer shell has burned away. There was a mouth that belonged on some tentacled thing that lives in a bubbling pool of nightmares.

Zito slashed at it.

Then Zito's knife was gone and Zito's wrist was broken.

Zito was on his knees. He was just starting to get hip to how much he

hurt when Beezy's scream became wild and lunatic.

Zito stopped hearing it when hurt filled him up and he went out.

HE ROSE FROM AN OCEAN OF DREAM to the reality of pain. He was chained, arms manacled overhead.

Zito tried to move. He couldn't, and the effort sent an earthquake of muscular agony from his shattered wrist to his shoulders.

Trennor Love's face swam into focus.

And behind him

God! Behind him was that thing. With Beezy. That thing covering her . . . a heavy oozing black draped itself over white, a white that thrashed and screamed.

Beezy didn't matter. No, damn it!

It was Zito, Zito his own self, Zito strung up and hurting he had to worry about.

There was a sound of breaking, the snapping of branches crushed under a heavy foot.

The thing was rising. Getting up. Beezy wasn't.

Zito had to stay cool. Had to. He was screaming, but that didn't mean anything, right? He was cool. Cool Zito.

"That was an interesting dance the young lady performed, don't you agree?" said Trennor Love. "And surely, Nordo was a star in his day. I imagine she is . . . she was . . . happy."

The thing slobbered and giggled like a rain of needles.

"And as for you, young man"

As for me, I'm screaming and screaming and it doesn't help, it doesn't change anything . . .

" . . . speech impediment. Nordo will correct that."

Zito squeezed shut his eyes. Bad enough he'd feel it.

He didn't have to see it, too.

He did feel it, felt it as his mouth was pried open. Then there was something that felt the way you always think a snake will feel slipping into his mouth. Something that had little points, grabbing at his tongue, pulling, pulling

"Nord do! Nordo do!"

Far back in Zito's head was a surprisingly soft "pop." He tasted something warm and coppery.

Head hanging, Zito opened one eye involuntarily.

There was a little blob of wet meat twitching on the dark floor.

No more stutter, Zito thought.

That was pretty cool, he thought.

Then he died.

*She was a chip off the old block — and that was
sometimes a problem!*

Daddy's Girl

by HAL CHARLES

KATE FLANDERS WAS TRYING IN VAIN to balance the checkbook when the phone rang. She threw her pencil down in the pile of cancelled checks. How had Phil managed to run up so many bills before he left? The sharp voice on the line identified himself as a Mr. Chambers who lived on the street behind her. His message wasn't altogether unexpected. Her ten-year-old daughter had a habit of getting into trouble. Like her father you just couldn't tell Molly anything.

Her stomach starting to tumble like an old dryer, Kate's first thought was to drive the block or so to the Chambers, but her Buick was in the shop getting something done to whatever the headgasket was. Then it was her coat. Their new home, an old framed house that had been converted into apartments, was nothing like the house they had left in Baltimore, and she had to spend a few more precious moments trying to find where her daughter had hung their fall things. Soon it would be winter and Molly would want a new jacket. Phil would have bought her the best, but if things didn't improve, Molly would have to learn to get along with less than she wanted.

THE YELLOW AND RED LEAVES CRACKLED beneath her feet as she trotted up the hill to Evergreen Lane. Tall oak trees shaded the old

neighborhood, one of the few in which the original houses remained undivided. All the homes were of course unnumbered, but almost directly behind her apartment house she found the Chambers' sign-post.

A servant answered her impatient knock. After Kate explained who she was, the aproned man led her down a mahogany-lined corridor into a spacious library with a cathedral ceiling. Though her mind was on Molly, she couldn't help but notice the inlaid teak furniture covered with jade figurines, the vellum editions swelling the shelves, and the mosaic of oriental carpets carefully arranged around the room. She could just imagine Phil examining one of the green objets d'art and that impish smile he got when he saw something he liked. The servant conducted her through an archway and into a sunlit room filled with greenery.

"Thank you, Bradford. You can get back to packing now." Kate turned to face a tall, distinguished man in a tweed jacket. "Hello," he said, "I'm Hugh Chambers and this is my wife, Irene." From across the room a pallid figure in a bone-white chiffon nodded at her.

Kate's eyes darted nervously around. "Where's Molly?"

"Your child," intoned Mrs. Chambers, "has been sent to the lavatory. Really, Mrs. Flanders, when we found her wandering through our garden, she was simply filthy."

"Even our gardener doesn't get that dirty," added her husband.

Kate felt her heart quicken and her palms moisten.

"I would have had her scrub herself thoroughly before lunch, but Hugh said she looked positively famished."

"You should have seen the way she devoured Bradford's salmon salad sandwich," chimed Mr. Chambers.

"Hi, Mom," interrupted a bubbly voice. "I wondered when you'd get here."

BETWEEN TWO POTTED PALMS BOUNDED A MUNCHKIN of a girl. Her overalls, her sneakers, and even her blond ringlets were caked with dirt. Looking into her daughter's saucer eyes, Kate shook her head and wished she could wipe off that impish smile that was starting to form at the corners of Molly's mouth. "How many times do I have to tell you not to wander off?"

"Gee, Mom, I was just 'splorin' the new neighborhood, and the Chambers' house — wow, it sure is big. And their garden . . ."

Taking Molly's hands in hers, Kate knelt in front of her daughter. "Honey, you know how I worry when you're out alone, especially since your father went away." Kate turned to the Chambers. "I'm sorry,

but Molly was such a daddy's girl and it's been hard for her to adjust. Our last house was bigger and"

"No need to explain, dear," broke in the monotone voice from the wicker chair. "Not every woman can be fortunate in her choice of a husband."

"Let me show you two out," said Mr. Chambers, shooting a sideways glance at his wife's expressionless face.

"Thank you," Kate replied, "but we can find our own way." She wanted to get out as fast as she could.

IT WASN'T UNTIL THEY REACHED THE HANDCARVED sideboard in the hall and were out of sight that Kate grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and spun her around viciously. "O.K., sticky-fingers, let's have it!"

"What do you mean, Mommy?"

Kate glared at her daughter. "You know what I mean."

Innocently Molly withdrew a tiny silver bell from her left pocket. Kate snatched it and set it down on the sideboard. Grabbing her daughter's upper arm, Kate marched her through the doorway and across the lawn.

"You little thief," Kate scolded, "don't you realize all the trouble you could cause taking something like that?"

Molly pulled her pink bicycle from behind a well-manicured hedge. "Cool it, Mom. You're a real drag."

"And you're just like your father. You see something and you have to have it right then. Don't you remember why we had to leave Baltimore?"

"Get off my case. I played that Shirley Temple role to a T. The silver's in the dining room, there's a Renoir you won't believe in the master bedroom, and the Mosler's a piece of cake. Sweet old Bradford even told me they're leaving tomorrow for Palm Beach."

"I don't mean to be hard, honey." Kate squeezed her daughter's hand gently. "But you keep forgetting why your father's up at Attica. He wanted one thing too much once too often. If you wanted that silver bell so bad, you could have waited a few days till we came back to get the whole haul."

"You're right, Mom. I sure don't want to end up in the slammer like Daddy."

A smile creeping out the corners of her mouth, Molly was so pre-occupied with caressing the jade figurine in her right pocket that she didn't notice the black-and-white police car pulling up in front of the Chambers.

She was alone in the house — and someone was outside, trying to get in!

The Prowler

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

STANDING IN THE DARK KITCHEN, SHARON GRIPPED the telephone to her ear and peered out the window at the house across the street. It was a black silhouette against the late night sky. As she watched, a light went on at the front of the house. A moment later, an old woman's voice answered the phone.

"Irene, this is Sharon."

"Why, hello, Sharon," Irene mumbled, stifling a yawn. "It's almost two a.m. Why on earth are you calling so late?"

"Because I'm frightened half to death," Sharon replied in a choked voice. "A few minutes ago, I heard the back door jiggling. I'm sure someone was trying to get in. And, last night, I heard a scratching at the window. When I checked this morning, there were footprints in the flower bed. I don't know —"

"Well, listen," the old woman interrupted. "The same thing happened to me two nights ago. It was after midnight, and I was awakened by a sound at the back door. When I turned on the light and looked, I saw a man in a long trench coat and a stocking cap running behind the garage. I called the police at once, but the prowler was long gone by the time they got here. They found a man's footprints though. And I was talking with Mrs. Hooper from down the block yesterday. She said she saw a man sneaking around her house earlier in the week. This used to be such a quiet, safe neighborhood!"

"I just don't know what to do, Irene. I'm all —"

"As soon as we hang up, call the police. But remember, Sharon, you're a lot better off than I am. At least, you've got a husband. My Chester died twelve years ago, and I'm all alone in the world."

"Carl's out of town on a business trip," Sharon said. "I'm not sure when he'll be home."

"He's certainly been on quite a few business trips this past year, hasn't he?" The innuendo in the old woman's voice was clear. Sharon knew that Irene kept close tabs on all the neighborhood gossip.

"Yes, he's been working awfully hard lately," Sharon said innocently.

"Carl is so handsome that I bet you hate when he's not around. Women must fall all over him."

"I trust my husband," Sharon said firmly. "But I do wish that he were here now. When I heard the sounds at the back door, I took Carl's rifle out of the closet and loaded it. I've got it right here beside me now."

"You be careful with that thing, Sharon. Just because there's a prowler in the neighborhood doesn't mean that you should shoot at everything that moves."

"Don't worry, Irene. I'll be care —" Sharon heard a noise at the back door as if someone were fumbling with the knob. "Someone's trying to get into the house again, Irene," she gasped. "Oh God, I'm so scared. Call the police for me, Irene."

SHARON SLAMMED THE RECEIVER ONTO ITS CRADLE and snatched up the rifle. It was heavy and awkward, but she had practiced holding and aiming it for over an hour before inserting the shells.

Suddenly, the back door swung open, and the dark outline of a man filled the doorway. Sharon held her breath as he entered the kitchen. Then, she jerked the rifle to her shoulder, leveled it at the intruder's chest, and pulled the trigger. As the explosion rattled the dishes in the cupboard, the man smashed backward against the wall, then collapsed onto the linoleum floor.

Sharon stepped across the kitchen and switched on the overhead light. She stared down at the crumpled form lying in a spreading pool of blood.

"Welcome home, Carl," she whispered. "You've just been on your last business trip with your little blonde, you cheating bastard."

With a half smile curling her lips, Sharon wheeled and hurried down the stairs to the basement. In a corner, she found the trench coat, stocking cap, and muddied men's shoes. She shoved them into the incinerator, then slowly walked back upstairs to wait for the police. ●

It was a duel between man and machine — and only one of them would survive the deadly contest!

Motorcycle

by WILLIAM BABULA

USUALLY DAVID SIKES WOKE UP AT FIRST LIGHT without an alarm clock, but this morning he was awakened by a motorcycle that sounded like it was buzzing their house. He sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"God damned lunatic!" he said under his breath as the noise faded to a drone.

At least it was starting to get light already. Beside him, his wife, as usual wearing a nightgown, was still sleeping, but fitfully. With her back to him all he could see was the thick blond hair that Rita wore in a bun during the day falling down over her neck and nearly bare shoulders to her sharp scapulae. The jutting bones made him think of angel wings. Rita shook her head nervously and an earring dangling from her pierced ear got tangled in her hair. On her fortieth birthday nearly a year ago she had her ears pierced and she had worn earrings constantly ever since. When she was a teenager her mother told her that nice girls didn't get their ears pierced. Now Rita told her what she could do with her advice.

Rita's breathing was quick and short, almost as if she were excited. David wondered if his wife, like him, had erotic dreams in the hour or so before waking.

David slipped out naked from under the sheet and blanket as noiselessly as a cat. His running clothes were spread out neatly on the cedar chest that stood at the foot of their bed. He dressed quickly in blue shorts and white top and carefully tied his blue nylon and leather Adidas running shoes. The last thing he needed was a blister. In the kitchen he poured himself a small glass of cold orange juice to wash down the B complex with C stress formula vitamin. Continuing in alphabetical order he took a vitamin E capsule that looked like an

amber jelly bean for his hair and skin. He knew he was probably wasting his money but he took them every day anyway.

As he started to the bathroom he paused to look down the tiled hallway toward two empty bedrooms that had once been occupied by his son and daughter. Both were in college now. Occasionally they returned, but they were now more like guests. His son, unwilling to leave the girl he was living with, wanted to stay in Idaho and work in construction for the summer. His daughter, caught up in the excitement of the city, wanted to stay in San Francisco. At least that was only thirty five miles to the west by the Interstate. There were so few things in this life that you could hold on to. David missed them, worried about them, worried about their tuition, and tried not to feel old. And so, every morning, no matter what the weather, he ran through the California valley.

As David Sikes washed up in the bathroom he inspected his face in the yellowish fluorescent light from above the medicine chest mirror. The skin of his face was a little looser now. While there were circles under his eyes and gray flowing back from his temples, his blue eyes were good and clear and his brown hair was thick. He looked at his profile. His nose was too long and too wide but that had nothing to do with being forty-four. There was a slight trace of a double chin which he patted up with the back of his hand. He thought hungrily of the young woman who had come into the store the other day and kept trying on the briefest jogging shorts and kept asking him what he thought. It must have been almost four years, at the convention in San Diego, since he had been unfaithful to Rita. Through the bathroom window he heard the motorcycle roar by again. The sound of the machine irritated him.

As he passed their bedroom on the way out he could see his wife's sleeping face. The lines around her mouth were scratched in like thin scars. A broken cobweb of lines ran back from the corner of each eye. Her eyebrows looked strained, as if she were forcing her eyelids to close. She was breathing almost in pants and David wondered what she was dreaming about.

Her covers had fallen partially away and David stared into the deep warm valley between her rising breasts. He was pissed off that they had argued again over nothing last night and had not made love. It had almost been a week. He ran his hand gently over the rising line of her hip. Under the blanket she shivered, as if she had been touched by ice.

OUTSIDE, DAVID FOUND THE LATE SPRING MORNING TO BE

cooler than he expected. Over the hills in the east the tarnished silver sky was beginning to lighten. There was no sign of the damn motorcycle. There would be some good running this morning before he had to open D & R Sporting Goods, the store he owned and operated with his wife in the shopping mall in Concord. He hoped Rita wouldn't give him any trouble about going to work today; he needed help with the inventory and the tennis rackets needed to be repriced and retagged. She was taking too much time off lately.

David did some calisthenics on the lawn under an oak tree and then he started his walk out of the Live Oak housing development where they had lived for the past eleven years. They had bought a brand new house, as Rita wanted, from the plans, and then watched for ten months while it went up with one hundred and ninety nine others on what had been the old County Fair grounds. The lawn of his house grew so well he imagined their lot must have been on the site of the stables. It would only take David a few minutes to get to the open roads and fields which began a quarter of a mile away. Two gray poodles, out looking for a lawn, eyed him suspiciously. When David walked past them they barked at him. A woman in a pink bathrobe, pink slippers, and huge pink curlers came out looking like a thief to get her newspaper. When she noticed David she gave him an unpleasant look, as if it were his fault that she looked as she did. David wanted to be on his flat dirt road, away from all of this, running toward the hills of the Diablo Range.

At first David just walked and stretched, trying to loosen his leg muscles and guard against pulls. When he got past the stone and wood wall that surrounded the development he stared out over the brown flat land before him and the rising hills. It looked like a desert. There had been very little rain recently and the hills were already a dry summer gold. On the other side of the ridge was the state highway that ran to Concord and the mall. If he listened carefully he could hear the distant thunder of tractor-trailers, which accounted for most of the traffic, on the road.

David wiggled his toes, flexed his deltoids, moved the flexors and extensors of his knees, and then he took off, crossing a county road to get to the open field dotted with sage and mesquite. He felt, and his doctor confirmed it, that he was in excellent shape. He kept his weight down easily enough except for the middle-aged spare tire he had been struggling against for the last ten years. Except for that minor problem he was a healthy running lean, just weighing in a few pounds over for the system that allows two pounds of weight for every inch of height. At seventy-three inches he was carrying a hundred and fifty pounds.

But he should still watch what he ate more carefully.

Knowing the first quarter mile would be the hardest, David began to force his legs to perform like pistons. After the first quarter mile the pain of the shin splints would pass. But his legs felt stiff and reluctant, like his wife lately.

The wind he generated began to blow into his face. It felt dry and dusty and smelled of sage. David began to lengthen his strides as he hit a dirt road that ran through the field toward the shadows that spread out from the west slopes of the low hills. The sky had brightened to a steel blue but the sun still hung behind the ridge. He began to run harder, remembering how Rita could never understand the difference between jogging and running. If any customers wanted advice on shoes, she called him over; her specialties were tennis and biking. Neither one of them knew much about the pitons, ice picks, ice hammers and other mountain climbing equipment imported from West Germany that they just started to handle. Business was good but Rita was always talking about selling out and moving away — maybe to Los Angeles. David was never sure what his wife really wanted.

THE DIRT CRUNCHED UNDER THE SOLES OF HIS ADIDAS shoes. Then he heard another sound, different from the noise of the trucks on the highway. At first David looked up, half expecting to see a squadron of jet fighters soar overhead, but the sky was blank. He realized the noise was coming from the county road he had crossed. It must be frightening the herd of cows that languished behind barbed wire to the south and east. What an asshole, David thought of the biker who was coming down the road like a rocket.

Soon the motorcycle would fade into silence again and David would have peace. He began to run faster, hitting the rough ground harder with his feet. There was always the chance that he could sprain or break an ankle, but David didn't like running with cars and trucks for companions on the paved road. He knew all the rough spots and where there were treacherous holes so he felt safe. As he ran he looked into the rain drainage gulleys that were cut into each side of the graded road.

But the noise behind him grew louder and David looked back to see the biker turning into the field next to the dirt road.

"Damn!"

David continued to run but he became aware of the cycle as it passed him far out in the field to his right. It was a shining red Harley Davidson bouncing over the uneven terrain. Light brown dirt shot up behind the machine like exhaust smoke and hung against the clear sky.

The biker crossed the dirt road fifty yards in front of David and then came around behind him. Then the machine swung around him again. The biker was making smaller and smaller concentric circles around him. David found himself running through curtains of brown dirt. As he sneezed from the dust in his nostrils, he cursed the crazy biker.

David's breath was getting a little short and he started to perspire freely. David was beginning to fear the motorcycle and its rider. He seemed to be getting into some irrational game.

There were only the two of them, and the cycle, on that flat stretch of land.

David thought of the hostility that could suddenly be directed at a stranger. Or was it a Hell's Angel high on drugs, out for a few laughs.

Suddenly bike and rider slid like someone stealing home a few yards in front of David, showering him with brownish dirt.

"Shit," David shouted as he stopped to avoid running into the rear wheel of the cycle.

David doubted that the bike and rider would get out of his way. The earth seemed to have opened up and released a chaotic force for evil which now confronted him.

THE DRIVER SAT IN THE SADDLE LOOKING LIKE A CREATURE from another world. His red crash helmet shimmered with gold flakes like fire in the sun that now cleared the ridge. He wore a one piece black jump suit and high black boots. There were no letters, signs, or symbols on his costume. He didn't seem to be part of any gang. The black smoked visor of the helmet was down and David could not see his face. In size his opponent was about two hundred pounds and probably six two or three.

Under the rider the cycle seemed to strain, wiggle, and groan like a woman in heat. If this was a robbery he had no money. He didn't even carry his wallet when he ran. And if he were murdered out here he would have no identification. But that was insane. David could hear the sound of a heavy rig climbing a hill of the state road and taking a curve.

"What do you want?" David asked the rider.

In response he gunned the idling motor of the Harley Davidson.

"I can't race against a machine."

The motor fired gray smoke from twin chrome tailpipes.

David wanted to reason with the rider but it seemed futile. Irrationally, he now had an antagonist. His first impulse was to leap at the man in the black jump suit and drag him down from his seat. But that wouldn't improve the odds much. Maybe the lunatic would just get

bored and leave him alone.

So David just stood there.

It seemed as if ten minutes had gone by with nothing changed.

David imagined the rider grinning at him satanically behind the visor. Why, he wondered, had this creature selected him?

Finally taking a step forward, David tried to get by, but the cycle moved up to block his way. In an absurd dance, David started in the other direction and the cycle rolled backwards.

Furious now, David shouted, "Will you get the hell out of the way!"

Laughter, strange and high, came from behind the visor. David imagined lifting the black visor and finding no head, a headless horseman on a motorcycle. The laugh seemed to freeze his heart.

Then David took a step back.

The rider turned the bike by balancing it on its back wheel. It went up like a rearing horse. The machine faced David as if it were a bull with one bright Cyclops eye and chrome handlebars for horns. David was frightened. How could this insane thing be happening to him.

Then suddenly, with a spit of dirt and gravel, the cycle charged at him. David managed to leap aside into the shallow drainage ditch. The wheels must have missed him by inches.

The motorcycle continued up the dirt road for another twenty yards then circled in front of him for a second charge. Desperately David was looking for a rock along the side of the road. He found three of them and held them in his left hand as he faced the machine. The first one he threw bounced off the front fender, barely missing the shining headlight. The second rock soared over the rider's head as he ducked.

Again David sidestepped the cycle and this time struck the red helmet with a rock that bounced up ten feet into the air. The rider just stood there, the cycle balanced between his legs. The force of the rock had no effect.

WITH THE CYCLE BETWEEN HIM AND THE COUNTRY ROAD, David started a sprint for the hills that rose about a hundred yard dash away. On the slope the cycle could not be very mobile and David might be able to make it to the highway.

For the first forty yards David was kicking away from the cycle. But then he heard, as he passed into the shadows, over his own grunts and pants, the sound of the motor and the sound of the wheels grinding the earth. The machine was angling at him from the right.

David stopped suddenly and the bike, as if in slow motion, drifted by him. David covered another twenty yards before the bike was at him, this time from the left.

Again David stopped and the cycle skidded by. This time it was close enough so that he felt metal and then rubber scrape against his left calf. On his leg there was a mark of black rubber and three thin lines of blood flowing down to his ankle.

Beginning a zigzag pattern, David ran on, off, and across the road. The bike kept hitting and slipping in the rain gulleys on each side of the road, keeping the rider off balance.

For the last twenty dark yards David put on the strongest finishing kick of his life. Without breaking stride he leaped up onto the shadowy slope of a hill and started up. His left calf was burning. The hill was marked and scarred by gulleys and covered with dry brown grass. There were a few sharp outcroppings of rock that he might try to use against his hunter.

But now maybe the rider would leave him alone. When he looked back he saw the bike begin to slither like a snake up the hill. A vortex of dust followed it up. The rider maintained balance by dragging his boots on the ground. At least the bike was moving much more slowly. David thought that he might have a chance.

David climbed, his calf and thigh muscles straining against the incline. His Adidas shoes slipped on some loose rock and he almost lost his balance. He devoured the air in front of him, gasping as he filled lungs that felt on fire. Behind him the cycle was stuck in a dusty gully.

Then it exploded free, the engine backfiring as the rider leaned back to take it up in the air.

From over the ridge David could hear the heavy rumble of a rig on the highway which seemed so close now. If only he could get down the eastern slope of the hill to the road where he could wave down a truck or car. Then he imagined a motorcycle gang snaking up the highway, coming after him, a dozen Harley Davidsons roaring like red devils out of hell.

A FEW YARDS FROM THE RIM OF THE HILL DAVID SLIPPED again, this time striking his head on a sharp outcropping of rock. For a moment he just lay there in the shade, dazed, listening to the machine gun motor of the Harley Davidson. When he reached up to touch his forehead he saw that his hand was smeared with blood — and sweat. The blood and water began to run down into his left eye and he wiped it with the back of his wet hand. Piece by piece he was being torn apart.

While he was still down, the hunter on the bike reached him. The madly revolving black and silver wheels came at his chest from the right — and from slightly above. If he stayed still or rolled downhill he

would be crushed. He imagined his heart and lungs squashed into the brown dirt. He would be a dark red stain on the hill. As the bike hovered above him like a bird of prey, David suddenly pushed his body up, forcing it to roll toward the ridge. The screaming bike grazed him, blackening his left arm.

"God!" What was happening to him?

But at least he was out of the shadows and into the sun still low in a scoured blue sky. He knelt on the ridge, the bike wallowing in loose dirt below him. Finally he saw the black band of highway. A huge rig was climbing up the band toward them. David wanted to rush down and signal it. He realized the other side of the hill was much steeper, apparently cut through by the engineers who built the highway. And it dropped down to a blind curve in the road. Even if he got down there the truck might not see him until it was too late. To his left he saw that the next hill dropped much more gradually. He would race along the ridge to that one. He didn't see how he could negotiate the sheer drop in front of him.

Before he could get up from his knees the bike was growling at him from below. It seemed to rear up, the rider hunched over the handlebars. Then the bike left the ground, flying gracefully at him. The black and red and chrome beast was in the air, soaring at David and the ridge.

David's reflexes threw him down and flat under the spinning wheels, and the bike and rider rose effortlessly over his prone body. The shadow passed over him — and over the ridge.

Then over the sound of the coughing and spitting motor came a high scream, inhuman in quality. The biker had obviously not realized how steep the other side of the hill, cut for the highway, was.

David quickly crawled up to the ridge and watched. His breath came in excited pants. Bike and rider were weaving uncontrollably down the face of the hill in a veil of brown dust.

The rig came around the blind curve with the fury of a train.

The squared-off green and silver cab was past the bike and rider but they slid together across the loose gravel shoulder, rubber and brakes burning, until they were under the trailer where machine and man were crushed like bugs under two massive sets of double tires. On the black asphalt the metal parts were scattered like gleaming broken bones. The rider seemed to be spread on the road like a thin layer of reddish paper. The helmet rolled like a head across the highway. Whatever he or it was, was gone.

DAVID RAISED HIS HEAD AND FELT THE WARM SUN touch his

burning skin. Dust coated his throat. The winner of this most savage of games vomited on the ridge of the hill.

The tractor-trailer screeched to a slow halt on the gravel shoulder, the horn whining, mourning death. From the green door of the cab, a short, squat driver wearing a T-shirt and a straw cowboy hat looked out and back down the road. When he glanced up to the hill, David ducked below the ridge.

There was nothing more to see. The trucker would curse the bastard on the cycle, put out a flare, and call the state police, who would come up and look around the hill. Blood was sprinkled over the rocks.

Sitting on the slope, David took off his shirt, tore it with difficulty, and tied a bandage around his head. The blood had formed a crust over his eye. He wiped it off with a piece of the soaked cotton material. His injured leg and arm ached, but he could move them and the bleeding of his leg had stopped.

Slowly and painfully he began his descent from the ridge of the hill. It had been an incredible chance encounter, a moment with the whimsical forces of the universe — and he had survived the ordeal.

At the base of the hill he sat down once more in the shadows. There was no breeze; dust and sagebrush were still. David was certain there was nothing more to worry about. He had defeated a Nimrod, a hunter of men in this deadliest of games.

RITA SIKES SAT UP IN BED IN HER NIGHTGOWN, WONDERING. It was so quiet. Then she heard the front door creak open.

"Is that . . ." she asked in a whisper. Then she gripped a pillow in terror. She hadn't heard the drone of the motorcycle outside.

She waited, her teeth clenched. When David appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, Rita gave a short cry, as if she had seen a ghost.

But she was saved by his bandaged and bloody appearance. "What happened to you?" she asked, her voice weak and her hands trembling.

"You wouldn't believe what happened." He collapsed against the frame of the door, and just sat there, his back propped up.

Then he told her.

"It was, it had to be, some doped-up crazy," David concluded.

Rita just sat there, like a woman carved out of petrified wood. Then she smiled and the lines of her face broke gently and she became flesh.

She pulled her nightgown up over her head, raised her thighs to slip off her nylon panties, and stretched out naked on the crumpled sheets: the prize.

The store would be closed today.

Maggie took a swallow of her vodka tonic and wished it was hemlock. She was about to be discarded, she knew that. But she had to find out for sure!

The Four Knights

by GERRY MADDREN

MAGGIE TURNED HER GLANCE FROM THE DESCENDING ROWS of fir trees outside the car window to her hands which rested awkwardly on her lap. She had painted the nails rust-color to match her new skirt but it hadn't helped. Her over-sized hands with their untapered fingers still looked like those of a man, or at least a near-grown boy.

"Better look at the map again," Harlan said, prudently keeping his eyes on the ever curving mountain road. "We must be getting close." Maggie stifled a sigh. She dreaded getting to their destination. When Rich and Becky had suggested this weekend get-together of "The Four Knights" and their wives she had longed to turn it down. A dozen excuses that she might use flashed through her desperate mind; but she had not allowed herself to use them. Painful as it might turn out, Maggie knew, for her own sake, she had to go.

"I think we're just getting into Rim Forest," she said, tracing the rough map Rich had drawn. "We turn left at the gas station, go past the ranger station and then start looking for Evergreen, which leads to High Rock Circle."

"Gotcha." Harlan smiled.

Yes, Maggie thought, *whether you want me or not, you've got me.*

She could see her husband's still rather youthful face reflected in the windshield. He was looking forward, as he always did, to seeing his old school pals. They'd met more than three decades ago in kindergarten, played together in elementary school and become the four knights in

high. After graduation they'd scattered into colleges across the country and emerged three with, one without diploma. After varying lengths of time they'd submerged into disparate careers, disparate life-styles. Only Christmas cards kept the link, grown tenuous, between them until one of the wives (Maggie couldn't remember now which it was) gave a dinner party to reunite them. And ever since then, at least two or three times a year, they met to eat and drink and tell old stories and exchange memories worn thin with time.

THEY PASSED THE RANGER STATION, FOUND EVERGREEN (lined with two, even three-storied houses) merging finally into High Rock Circle.

"Just look for the most expensive one in the block," Maggie mumbled, suddenly convinced that it was only a streak of masochism that had brought her here. The feeling grew as the day turned into evening and they all gathered around the fire, cocktail glasses in hand, cashew nuts in a bowl, the air filled with unremitting peals of laughter. Nicole wore a deep red, clingy jumpsuit that not only showed her shape but screamed *look at me, look at me, I've got the best figure in this group and damned near any other.*

Maggie took a swallow of her vodka tonic. She wished it was hemlock. Nicole was telling a story about her last trip to Paris, no less. Harlan had that goofy look on his face, the one that meant his mind was running through a reel of fantasies. What kind of fantasies? *Huh*, Maggie thought, *any fool could guess. Still, you can't blame a guy for having a few sexy thoughts . . . if they're only thoughts.*

"Well," Maggie reminded herself as she watched the crimson flames dancing behind the firescreen, "that's what I came here to find out."

She realized after several minutes that Aaron was going over the Catalina Island episode again, the four knights in a dinghy. Rich, Harlan and Nicole's husband, Dutch, added favorite remembered bits as he went along. Helen was helping Becky set the table. It had been placed in front of a huge, floor-to-ceiling window giving out on the wooded hillside, which was gradually becoming visible in the light of the nearly-full moon.

Why do I have to be so suspicious? Maggie scolded herself. *Why can't I just enjoy the drinks and the fire and the mountains?* But she knew why. Because people can't enjoy anything when they think they're about to be discarded. At least *she* couldn't. She stood up abruptly.

"I think I'll see if Becky needs another hand," she said. But no one

paid the slightest attention. Nicole was talking about the latest water-color she'd sold.

AFTER DINNER THEY ALL WENT DOWNSTAIRS TO PLAY POOL, or at least Maggie had thought they were all there — until they started the third game and she looked over her poised pool cue and noticed that Harlan had disappeared. Nicole as well. *Come on*, her common sense chided her, *people have to go to the bathroom now and then!* She conceded that both Harlan and Nicole could have had to answer nature's call at the same time (there was, after all, more than one bathroom) but she wasn't going to buy it. Aaron, swaying unsteadily, was lining up what he announced would be a four-pocket drop when Maggie slipped out and went noiselessly up the carpeted stairway.

They were standing in the living room, between the dining table and the fireplace. Nicole's face was flushed, maybe from the heat of the fire, maybe from something else. At the sight of Maggie she turned away and pretended to be looking at the bookshelf.

"Hi, hon." Harlan's arm went quickly around Maggie. Too quickly. "Let's go in the kitchen and get me a can of beer." His arm pressed persistently against her back, guiding her away from the living room, away from Nicole. "Then we can get back to the pool game," he kept on, "and give it a little class." Maggie went along . . . with all of it for the time being.

THE NEXT DAY AT LUNCH NICOLE ASKED DUTCH FOR THE keys to their car. She'd mangled one of her very long fingernails and wanted to go to the local beauty shop and have it repaired. Maggie breathed a sigh of relief as Nicole trotted out and the rest of them settled down for a game of poker.

They'd been playing almost an hour when the telephone rang. Becky answered it, listened for a while and then called for Harlan.

"Someone calling long-distance from Los Angeles — about your lost credit card, she says." Maggie's ears picked up on the word *she*. Harlan lifted the receiver to his ear. He didn't say anything for about thirty seconds and then all he said to the caller was "okay."

"Which credit card was it?" Maggie asked when he hung up.

"The Carte Blanche," Harlan answered, looking away.

Maggie felt her knees trembling against the table leg. He could have said the Visa or the May Company or any of the others. But Maggie had seen the Carte Blanche in his wallet when they'd stopped to buy gas in San Bernadino.

Harlan came back to the table and picked up his hand. From then on

he started to lose. Maggie had never seen him play so recklessly. His poker chips dwindled to half . . . half that again and then to nothing.

"That wipes me out," he said, not (in Maggie's opinion) sounding too sad.

"Here," she volunteered, "you can have part of mine."

He pushed them back toward her. "With the way my luck's going it'd be a waste of time. Better I should go jogging, clear the cobwebs out of my head."

Maggie felt her uneasiness growing. "I'd go with you if I'd brought my tennis shoes."

"I've got some but I guess they'd be too . . ." Becky trailed off.

"Yes, they'd be way too small," Maggie finished Becky's sentence for her. "I've got big feet."

Harlan bent down and gave her a light kiss on the forehead. "My dad used to say big feet were a sign of good understanding." He smiled and started for the hall. Maggie pushed her chips aside.

"As long as the game's breaking up," she said before the others could protest, "I think I'll take the opportunity to grab a nap."

WHEN SHE GOT TO THEIR ROOM HARLAN WAS CHANGING his clothes.

"Where're you going to jog?" Maggie tried to sound natural.

Harlan shrugged his shoulders. "Around. See a little scenery, I guess."

"I'm sorry I can't go with you."

"I'm sorry too." He kissed her again, only this time it was much better, if slightly hurried. "Be a good girl while I'm gone," he whispered and then he went through the door.

Maggie made sure it was closed. Then she opened the french doors and stepped onto the balcony. For the first time she was thankful for her height and her big, strong hands as she climbed over the rail, let herself hang from the edge of the balcony for a moment and then dropped soundlessly into the brush at the garage-side of the house.

As she moved along the hillside, sheltered by fir trees and other natural growth, she could see Harlan below on the road. He wasn't jogging but walking fast. His usual easy stride was widened considerably, hardly the stride of a stroller whose chief objective was the scenery. He passed the golf course and then the bridge and then crossed to a cluster of quaint, Tyrolean-type buildings and disappeared into the Swiss Miss Bar.

Maggie's heart felt like a lead sinker. She picked her way down to the road, took the same route Harlan had and found, as she'd begun to

fear she would, Nicole's car in the parking lot on the side of the bar. For a moment she didn't know what to do. Maybe they would stay in the bar. But it wasn't very likely, was it? They would want to go some place, some place where they could be alone.

She looked thoughtfully at the car's trunk. She could still persuade herself that it might be an innocent meeting. She'd seen television shows like that, where it turned out the husband only wanted help in buying his wife a birthday present or something. Never mind her birthday was eight months away. She didn't want to believe (until she absolutely had to) that Harlan didn't love her anymore.

The door in the back of the car had been left unlocked and, as though providence was at least this once on her side, there was a thick plaid lap robe thrown carelessly on the floor. Maggie climbed into the car, scrunched down on the floor, pulled the lap robe on top of her and made herself as little as possible.

SHE WAS SWEATING WITH OVER-WARMTH AND FEAR by the time Nicole and Harlan arrived. She almost cried out as the front seat slid backwards and pressed abruptly against her. *So Harlan was driving.* The ignition switched on. The motor rumbled and died. She knew Harlan would pump the accelerator. When the car was cold he always did. The motor rumbled again, threatened to die and then turned into a steady hum. The car backed out of its parking space, curved around and headed forward.

"I did some serious thinking last night." Harlan's voice sounded funny to Maggie but she attributed it to the lap robe muffling her ears.

"I thought you would." Nicole's voice was smug. "It wasn't an idle threat you know."

"You really would tell Maggie and make Dutch seem like a schmuck because of one lousy night?"

"I'd shout it from the housetops, sweetheart. I figure I'm due for a change. Dutch bores me to the eyebrows and you . . . on the other hand" Her voice mellowed and Maggie could imagine her hand straying over to Harlan's thigh.

"Still, there'd be a lot of doubt that the baby's mine."

Maggie braced herself against this merciless new stab of pain.

"Not in my mind," Nicole purred. "I told you Dutch bores me. He has for a long time. It's been about a year and a half since we've shared the same bed. And besides, there's always those adorable blood tests that prove paternity, you know. That alone should make up your mind." Maggie felt her body tipping as the car negotiated another curving incline.

"Yes," Harlan said, pressing his foot down on the accelerator, "I've made up my mind."

"For God's sake, be careful!" Nicole's tone raised a good octave.

"You can bet your bottom dollar I'm going to be careful, Nicole. I'm going to be damned careful Maggie's not hurt by your design and my foolishness. I'd do anything to protect that woman because she's not like you, Nicole, she's a real woman, a real wife. I love her," Harlan almost shouted.

Maggie's heart danced like a butterfly. Suddenly her hands felt small and her body willowy. The car whipped dizzily around another curve, rocking her against the edge of the seat.

"I love Maggie enough to kill for her," Harlan said.

Maggie had never in her life felt such joy. The car door opened. Something (Harlan? Maggie was sure it must have been Harlan) thudded to the ground as the car left the road and shot into space. In front Nicole screamed non-stop as the car plunged toward the canyon below, but Maggie had no room for fear. She was too filled with the happy knowledge that, plain as she was, Harlan loved her this much.

Bogart!

he's
back
from
Casa-
Blanca!



and
Raymond
MASSEY
Alan
HALE

ACTION in the NORTH ATLANTIC

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Want to put in your two cents' worth? Speak up, tell us what's on your mind. Write to: Mike's Mail, Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine, Renown Publications, P.O. Box 178, Reseda, CA 91335. Do it now, while you're in the mood!

PULP

I noticed that the December issue had another Frank Hamilton in it. So happily I purchased a copy. Then the January issue did not have a Frank Hamilton in it. So unhappily I did NOT purchase a copy.

So if you want me, at least, to keep buying MSMM, then please keep the Hamilton and Avallone pieces coming. Also, think seriously about some stories relating to the old pulp heroes. Some are not copyrighted.

Albert Tonik
3341 Jeffrey Dr.
Dresher, PA 19025

I'd like to run some of the old pulp stories, but the time required to find out who owns the rights to the material and correspond to obtain clearance and so forth is more than I can spare at the moment. However the notion persists, and hopefully one day it'll happen. Meanwhile, Frank and Mike are gearing for a fresh onslaught on nostalgia and should be appearing more regularly within the next few months.

LOVEABLE?

Yes, Mike is loveable, with those steel-hard eyes and fighting fists. Ruff. I am now a subscriber to MSMM. I got my first issue in November. Haven't received December yet. But I did get a box of MSMM (22 books) from a very nice lady from New York, no charge for them, as she said, "Happy reading" and pass them on. I got three letters from one gentleman and a phone call from another one in Florida. Mike's friends are special. I want to thank them all from the bottom of my heart, will never forget them.

The books in the box were back issues of a few 79, all of 80 except Nov., and some 81. Can't find any around here where Phyllis was with him. The soft spot Mike has for crippled children, love that, and the love for Phyllis, and now for Lucy, only natural. We all need someone, right?

Keep Mike in there; he hasn't changed that much, he is still that rough and tough detective we all love.

Would love to have some back issues from 79 back. I am only 61, 62 on March 2. I've read Mike in paperbacks for years and will continue to do so. Will be waiting for my issue of December and all the others. No questions or comments yet. Some or most of the short stories are OK. Like Mike's Mail.

Mary A. Head
517 Corum Drive
Madisonville, KY 42431

Come on, Mary, stop beating around the bush — do you like Mike or don't you? But seriously, we're thrilled that you get so much enjoyment out of him. Phyllis died many years ago, but in the October 1980 issue (which apparently you have) we showed in a flashback episode the circumstances of her death. Other than that, you'll have to try to get some of the Shayne novels from the early forties. And Happy Birthday!

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